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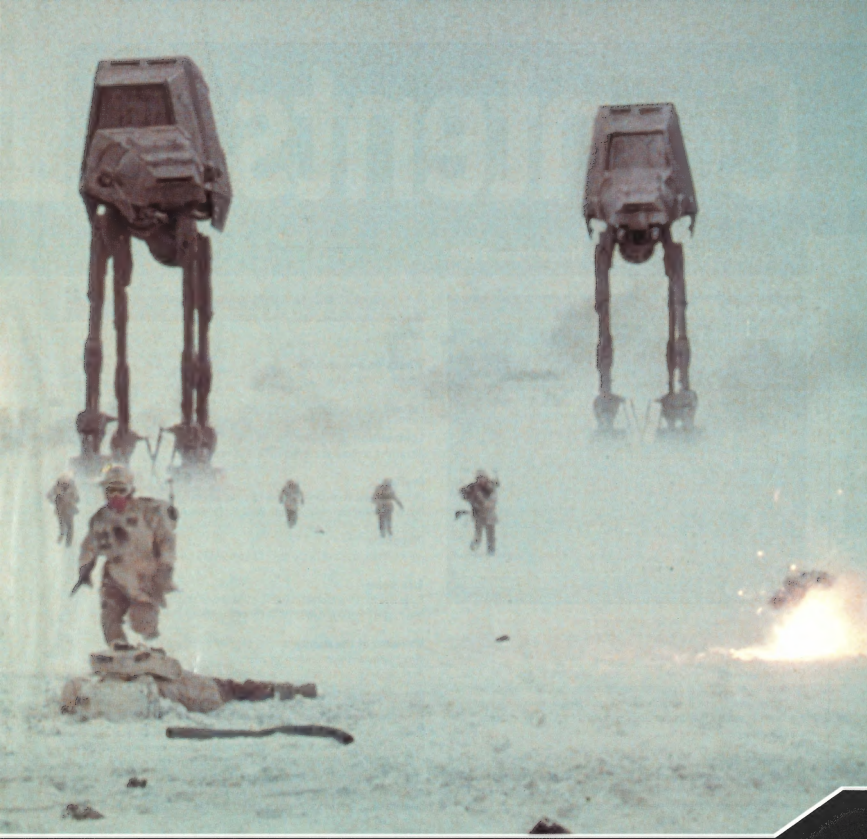

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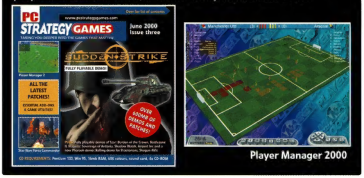
What's on the CD? 6

Without wishing to blow our own trumpet, this month's CD is the best yet. As well as all the usual patches and demos, we've got some fine-looking AVIs and seven (count 'em, seven) demos to tickle your fancy, including Battlezone II, Sudden Strike, Tzar, a brand new Pharaoh mission from the vaults of Impressions Studios in the US and, from those good people at Krisalis and Take 2, an exclusive Airport Inc demo. At last.



Player Manager 2000

Previews

Ground Control 20

Ho-hum. Another RTS set in a post-apocalyptic, corporate future. Or is it? No-one quite knows how to label it – it deliberately drops the resource management aspect so beloved of RTS developers to place the emphasis firmly on tactical warfare.

Starship Troopers 22

First, it was a 3D shooter based on Paul Verhoeven's film, now it's an RTS based on Robert Heinlein's classic 1950s sci-fi book and the latest CGI-fuelled animated TV series. Whatever, we've taken a good first look at it.

Player Manager 2000 24

Football is big business these days, and while few of us can hope of leading England out onto the pitch at Wembley in a World Cup final in real life, we can do it virtually. Player Manager 2000 is the latest addition to the genre, and it offers all the usual options, the stats and a neat little 3D match view.

Ground Control

Star Wars: Force Commander 26

LucasArts strike back with another 3D RTS that replaces resource management with strategic fighting. Of course, this baby has AT-ATs to boot... This could be the game that puts the Star Wars portfolio back at the top of the tree – it will certainly have us rooting about in our attics looking for lost toys.

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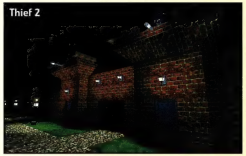
Pyro announces three new strategy games for Eidos; Cryo goes online with the Machiavellian world of Venice; Activision announces Star Trek title; Matrix purchases wargames from Kamikaze; new titles and multimedia packages from Red Storm in the pipeline; more departures from Sid Meier's Firaxis Games; Liquid develops Battle Realms for Crave; expansion packs for Pharaoh and SimCity 3000 announced; DirectX 8.0 announced by Microsoft.

Online Gaming 28

Is the single player experience soon to become a thing of the past? Every single game now offers multiplayer features and online support, enabling players from all over the globe to link up and battle it out for supremacy. Is this more proof of the emergence of a global community or an excuse for poor AI programming? The PCSG team takes a good look at how to get online.

RPGs – are they strategy games? 86

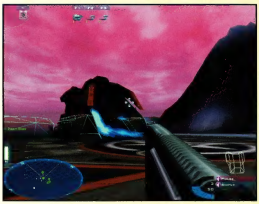
Magic and monsters, swords and sorcery – the RPG is going through a bit of a purple patch right now, as fundamental changes to gameplay have rejuvenated the scene. But how strategic are they? Can we justify reviewing them in PCSG? We've established a kangaroo court to decide the issue...



This Month's Reviews

Battlezone II: Combat Commander 36

Activision's update of its 1998 3D RTS follows on from that game's storyline, with Earth forces facing a new threat in the form of the Scions, a deadly alien race. Or are they? Recruit armies, build bases, call in the troops or get into the thick of the action yourself for a bit of sniping and vehicle commandeering on five beautifully rendered planets. But does BZII have the gameplay to match the graphics?



Earth 2150 44
Command & Conquer-style RTS games are two-a-penny these days, but Earth 2150 has been wowing them across Europe for the last few months. Now we're getting our own version with the radio traffic in a language we can understand, rather than the original German. Anyone familiar with resource management, base construction and tech trees will feel instantly at home, but the game promises to crystallise all these elements into a single, seamless whole.

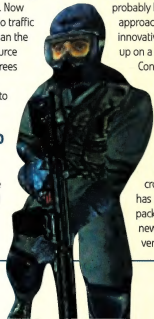
Majesty 50
Cyberlore's first offering is, on the surface, just another fantasy-based RTS enhanced with some fine graphics and a healthy dose of humour. Scratch a little deeper, and you'll find an innovative management system – bribing heroes to do your bidding – that turns the genre on its head.

Tiberian Sun - Firestorm 54
Another day, another Command & Conquer add-on pack from Westwood, who arguably started the whole damn RTS craze in the first place. Firestorm offers new missions, new units and a new multiplay facility, but will it come up short on the originality front?

Airport Inc. 60
Many of you have been waiting to read the review and play the demo before making up your minds over Krisalis' phenomenally detailed Airport management game. It boasts an intricate contractual system, massive flexibility and terrorist threats. But does it actually work as a game?

Thief 2: The Metal Age 66
Thief: The Dark Project was a neglected classic, probably because Looking Glass Studios' approach to gameplay was unique and so innovative that it confused a public brought up on a diet of Quake and Command & Conquer, but has quickly become a cult. Thief 2 looks set to eclipse its success.

Rogue Spear: Urban Operations 72
Sierra's SWAT 3 threatened to steal the squad-based tactical shooter crown from Rogue Spear. Red Storm has hit back with a brand new expansion pack that packs more of a punch, offering new missions, new weapons and some very determined terrorists...



5th Column

Games design - the final frontier? 93
Alan Emrich, our non-resident American industry insider with his finger on the pulse, takes a closer look at how attitudes to game design have changed over the past 30 years. There's too much marketing and not enough gameplay going into game design these days, he thinks...

Violence solves nothing 94
People are daring to suggest that PC games incite impressionable young kids to commit violent acts and steal cars. It's almost enough to make our mild-mannered columnist reach for her AK47... But is it fair for Americans to blame teenage violence on computer games rather than on the US gun industry and its opposition to banning handguns? Games aren't real, kids know it, and the vast majority of them aren't turned psychotic by the games they play, says Kristen. Oh, and in Strategies this month, Kristen gives us a tip on how to profit from murder in The Sims. What do you want – consistency?

They're simply the best? 96
After the PCSG team waxed lyrical about why we play games and what games we play most in last month's issue, Mike Siggins decided it was his turn. He takes us through his five favourite games of all time, and uses the exercise to muse about questions at the heart of strategy gaming – such as what makes a game a classic, why some games just never make the grade, and why do fools fall in love?

DOMINATION
INDEPENDENCE
SURVIVAL
THE BATTLE BEGINS...
DOGS OF WAR
DEFINING A NEW GENRE IN TACTICAL GAMING
PC CD
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'BAN QUAKE, HOME OFFICE ADVISER DEMANDS'.

Yes, we're racing headlong into the silly season, when the nation's tabloid newspapers and increasingly more tabloid-ish TV shows search desperately for populist stories which they can blow up out of all proportion. And what's the target for tonight? Violent video games.

Play Quake, and you'll rush out and kill half a dozen people. At least, that's the idea. Personally, I'm more inclined to want to kill half a dozen people after waiting at Waterloo for a train that never comes, or spending three hours stationary on the M25.

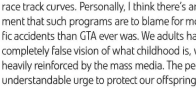
The argument as currently put forward by the tabloid media is, of course, a specious one. If video games actually made us commit violent acts, the population of Britain would have been halved in the last 10 years. And, as Kristen Bowditch points out in her column this month, violent video games are only the latest in a long line of bugbears to be blamed for making kids run around hitting people and stealing things. Every generation of children has been turned into homicidal maniacs by something their parents don't approve of. And have you read any fairy tales in their original versions? Rumpelstiltskin tears himself in half at the end...

The argument that the Home Office expert is putting forward actually makes far more sense than the tabloid spin that's been put on it. Professor Kevin Browne, an eminent forensic psychologist, argues that those with a predisposition towards violence are more likely to commit crimes and become a menace to society if they have been playing PC games which celebrate murder and mutilation. He says: "What these games are doing is reinforcing their own distorted thinking processes."

So he's saying these children already have problems. Why? And where's the research into how much more violent children become after they've been playing football? Cowboys and Indians? Doctors and Nurses? That may sound flippant, but it's not meant to be. Play is an important part of the learning process. The idea that childhood is some Edenic interlude where all we have to do all day is skip around and love each other is nonsense. Childhood is when we're growing up, and it's a painful and confusing thing. But the vast majority of us, emerge as (relatively sane) adults. We need to explore; we need to make mistakes; we need to experience different things. And if we are to grow up properly, then we need to do things our parents don't approve of.

I can accept that certain personality types will have their existing anti-social tendencies reinforced by some computer games. But teenagers massacring other teenagers with semi-automatic weapons is, as Kristen points out, an indictment not of video games but of a US society which encourages its citizens to worship guns, and of parents who are too divorced from their own children to help them grow properly. And teenagers killing other people or themselves by driving high performance cars too fast is an indictment of a British society which encourages its citizens to worship the car.

Our TV channels are saturated with programs about cars, and you can be sure that the vast majority of them don't focus on seat belts, air bags and ABS: no, they focus on speed and just how fast their laddish presenters can throw the latest models around race track curves. Personally, I think there's an argument that such programs are to blame for more traffic accidents than GTA ever was. We adults have a completely false vision of what childhood is, which is heavily reinforced by the mass media. The perfectly understandable urge to protect our offspring is in danger of becoming a monomaniacal desire to shield them from all experience.



Martin Croft
Editor
martinc@crimsonpublishing.co.uk

What's on the CD?

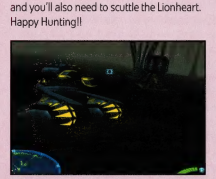
Build kingdoms in the skies or domains in the desert: either way, you have the power...

Playable demos

Battlezone II: Combat Commander *(Activision)*

Minimum Specs: Pentium 200 MHz, Windows 95/98, 4x CD-ROM, 64Mb RAM, 500Mb HD space, DirectX compatible Video Card, 3D Graphics Accelerator

If you've read this month's in-depth Battlezone II review, you'll no doubt have had your appetite considerably whetted. Well, you can now sate your hunger with this month's sumptuous BZII demo. The dropships Lionheart and Valiant have been assigned drop detail on the alien planet Mire. The Lionheart comes under fire and crashes. You've been assigned to spearhead the ISDF force, which will knock out the alien defences and rescue the survivors of the crash. Oh, and you'll also need to scuttle the Lionheart. Happy Hunting!!



Majesty *(Hasbro)*

Minimum Specs: Pentium 166MHz, 4x CD-ROM, 32Mb RAM, 60Mb hard disk space, 2Mb video card

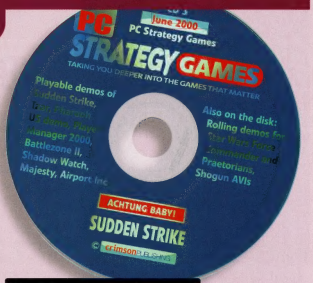
Majesty offers an interesting spin on the fantasy based RTS. You've got to bribe your way to success. Build guilds to attract intrepid adventurers, then provide incentives

to ensure that... well, things get done. That orc infestation causing difficulty? Slap a bounty on their heads and some enterprising warrior will attempt to dispose of them for you. In the demo, your peaceful reign has been blighted by an evil presence.. Ensure that this death-dealing miasma is removed from your idyllic kingdom,

Sudden Strike *(CDV)*

Minimum Specs: Pentium 133MHz, 4x CD-ROM, 32Mb RAM, 100Mb hard disk space, 2Mb video card

CDV's World War II RTS, Sudden Strike has caused many an anticipatory pang in the PCSG office. It's a melding of Close Combat IV and Total Annihilation and the accent is firmly on fast-paced, frenetic action. This demo puts you, as commander of the German forces, in a race against time. You've got to charge across the battlefield to reach your objective before the British forces can link up with a heavily armoured Soviet outfit.



Tsar: Burden of the Crown *(Zablac)*

Minimum Specs: Pentium 200MHz, Win95/98, 32Mb RAM, 160Mb hard disk space, SVGA monitor with 800x600 res, 16-bit colour res, video card with 800x600 res

A very comprehensive demo of Zablac's excellent fantasy RTS. You'll get a simple introductory level designed to ease you into the game, followed by a mission taken from

Vital Utilities

DirectX 7 The latest version of Microsoft essential graphics drivers.

Winzip 7 The premier archiving tool (for contracting and expanding program files).

Paint shop Pro 6 An excellent budget art package.

Adobe Acrobat Necessary for reading some online game manuals.

Hypersnap Allows you to take screenshots, even in games which sport DirectX/Direct3D or 3DFX modes.

the single player campaign mode. You'll also get two sample random maps which should give you a taste for just how flexible and infinitely replayable Tzar is. Oh, and if that weren't enough, you'll get a four player mission. A sizeable in-depth demo in an age where decent demos are becoming more difficult to come by.

Pharaoh Demo 2

(Sierra)

Minimum Specs: Pentium 133MHz, 4x CD-ROM, 32Mb RAM, 175Mb hard disk space, 1MB video card

Fancy yourself as a bit of a Rameses or maybe you're more the Cleopatra type? Look no further, because this month's Pharaoh demo should allow you to indulge your pyramid-building tendencies in a socially acceptable manner. It contains three missions: two are set in the predynastic era which are similar to the first two levels in the full game, with one set in the archaic period which is exclusive to this demo. This third mission will provide a stiff challenge while introducing you to the monument building elements in Pharaoh. This demo has not appeared on UK cover disks before. Which is nice.

Shadow Watch

(Red Storm)

Minimum Specs: Pentium 133MHz, 4x CD-ROM, 32Mb RAM, 100Mb hard disk space, 2Mb video card

This interesting little demo provides 4 levels of play culled from the full Shadow Watch campaign setting. It's a turn based, tactical RPG which in its complete guise allows you to control a squad of up to six characters.

The demo will let you chaperone two operatives around the hand painted (yes, that's hand painted) landscapes. It's a strange looking confection which resembles a cross between Incubation and X-Men. Give it a whirl, because we think you'll be pleasantly surprised.

Force Commander – rolling demo

One of the years most eagerly awaited RTS titles. Here's a little taster to get your juices flowing. You'll command AT-ATs, Scout Walkers, speeder bikes and Tie fighters among others. No messy resource management elements, either – you get plunged straight into the action. It's going to be massive. Oh, and the Imperial March remix. Watch out, Ibiza, here come the stormtroopers!

Airport Inc *(Krisalis)*

Minimum Specs: Pentium 200 MHz, Win 95/98, 4x CD-ROM, 16 Mb RAM, 300 Mb hard drive space, 4Mb Video Card

It's the ultimate Airport management sim which allows you to design, build and run your very own airport from the ground up. You'll need to decide on location, terminal layout, size and positioning. It's an in-depth micro management treat.

Player Manager 2000 *(Anco)*

Minimum Specs: Pentium 166MHz, Win 95/98, 2x CD-ROM, 32 Mb RAM, 45 Mb hard drive space

This demo allows you to test your skills as a player manager in the English premier league. You can also play as a manager only, but where's the fun in that? A possible Championship Manager beater? You decide.

Praetorians – rolling demo

From Pyro Studios, who gave us Commandos. You'll take command of the elite Praetorian Guard, and fight savage battles on lovingly rendered 3D battlefields in Gaul, Egypt and Italy. *Needs Windows Media Player.*

Two Shogun AVI cut-scenes

Two clever fillers from the people at Creative Assembly. One AVI depicts a ninja successfully wiping out a man of the cloth with a Spy vs Spy type bomb, while another shows what happens when it all goes horribly wrong. *Needs Windows Media Player.*

Patches and add-ons on the CD

Age of Wonders 1.35
New bug fixes and gameplay alterations should ensure that the game runs more smoothly and fairly.

Battlezone II 1.1
Stabilises the game in multiplayer mode, makes the Hauler more effective, strengthens the bridge.

Close Combat IV 4.02
A more aggressive, cleverer AI. Other bugs fixed, artwork altered, Windows 2000 compatibility improved.

Creatures 3 Update 2
New genomes for use in new and saved games alike are available here. Also fixes a few minor bugs.

Total Annihilation: Kingdoms 3.0BB
This patch resolves some bug problems and provides new units.

Delta Force 2 v1.06.15
Fixes a number of minor glitches, and incorporates version 1.06.14, which allows fixed weapons to be used by players in online missions.

The Operational Art of War 2 1.05
Some adjustments are made to gameplay and some minor bugs are fixed when this patch is installed.

C&C: Tiberian Sun 2.02
Changes mostly affect multiplayer games: but if you're planning to upgrade to Firestorm (see the review later in this issue), this facilitates inter-compatibility.

West Front 1.05 and West Front 1.05s
A few slight adjustments to AI and gameplay can make a lot of difference...

Pharaoh Enhancement Pack
A mission editor with which new levels can be designed, plus new missions, features and options.

Rollercoaster Tycoon: Alton Towers
Staffordshire's finest Theme Park as an RCT scenario, complete with Oblivion.

Rollercoaster Tycoon: Fort
Another new scenario for RCT — this time, the wild, wild West!

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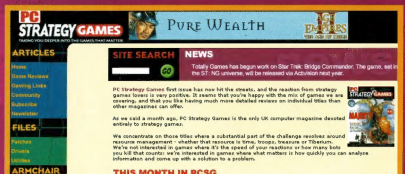
What's on our website

If you like what you see in the magazine, then you'll want to visit us online. You'll find reviews, news, links, patches, discussion groups and much more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NEWS
Totally Games has begun work on Star Trek: Bridge Commander. The game, set in the ST: NG universe, will be released via Activision next year.
PC Strategy Games' first issue has now hit the streets, and the reaction from strategy games lovers is very positive. It seems that you're happy with the mix of games we are covering, and that you like having much more detailed reviews on individual titles than other magazines can offer.
As we said a month ago, PC Strategy Games is the only UK computer magazine devoted entirely to strategy games.
We concentrate on those titles where a substantial part of the challenge revolves around resource management - whether that resource is time, troops, treasure or Tiberium. Where other magazines will tell you how to blow your enemies to bits (and we'll tell you, we'll tell that counts), we're interested in games where what matters is how quickly you can analyze information and come up with a solution to a problem.
THIS MONTH IN PCSG
Previews:
Majesty: Sovereign of Ardania
Haskin's RTS with a difference. Instead of ordering your forces to do things, you have to encourage them with a little bit of bribery.
Earth 2150
Fresh in from Germany, Topware Interactive's RTS puts the player in charge of one of three competing power blocs, seeking to escape the dying Earth and start again on Mars.
Star Trek: Armada
Activision's latest takes the Star Trek universe and turns it into a fully 3D space-based RTS. You can command the Federation, the Klingon Empire, the Borg or the Romulans.

Above: This is what our website used to look like. Pretty, isn't it? But we don't want to give you this... No, we want to give you an even better website!

If you're new to PC Strategy Games and you've read this far, then chances are you're a dedicated strategy gamer who is looking for more authoritative and more in-depth information about the games you like to play. Well, hopefully the print version of PC Strategy Games is going to give you just that sort of coverage. And if it doesn't, then we want to know where you think we're going wrong, so get e-mailing.

But PC Strategy Games is more than just a magazine: we have also launched our own website, **www.pcstrategygames.com**, where you'll find even more information about the games you love.

If you've already taken a look at our website, but haven't been back recently, you might want to drop by again, because we've already made some fairly radical changes based on feedback from readers of the magazine and visitors to the site.

The main change has been to add a section explaining who we are here in the office. Readers wanted to know a bit more about our team of reviewers than is provided by the brief biographies included in the magazine. They also wanted to know more about the philosophy behind the magazine as a whole.

So you'll now find on our site a section headed 'Who we are' and another headed 'Where we're coming from'. In these, we try and explain the rationale behind the launch of PC Strategy Games, why we're eminently qualified to comment on the latest developments in the strategy games industry and a few of the things we plan for the future.

If you haven't been to the website yet, it's well worth a visit. Don't expect to see just an online version of the magazine, though, because we believe that print magazines and websites are complementary but different media.

For example, we think that you'd rather be able to read a long piece on your favourite game while you're having your supper, or lying on the sofa, or even on the bus to work – so we won't be putting the feature articles or game reviews that you see in these pages online.

On the other hand, the Internet is the perfect tool for finding and sorting large amounts of data swiftly, and presenting information in a concise manner. So amongst the things you'll find on our website will be short, concise reviews (a bit like our 300 word opinion boxes in the reviews in the magazine). You'll be able to search the site and find out what we think of that game you've just seen in the shop down the road.

But – and this is an important but – what we think isn't everything; we also want to know what you think about the games we are covering. So we're going to be using the website as a forum for your views, and one of the ways we're going to be doing that is by letting PC Strategy Games' readers submit their own short reviews of their favourite games. Oh, and games they think aren't worth the effort it takes to load them up...

Here's a taster of what you'll find on our site at the moment. I say 'at the moment', because a website should never be set in stone, as it will quickly be out of date. Instead, a website should be a living entity – so make sure you keep dropping by to check what the newest changes are.

Better yet, why not sign up for our monthly e-mail newsletter, which will keep you up to date on what's in the latest issue of the magazine as well as what's happening on the website? If you register for the newsletter before April 30, 2000, then you could win a year's free subscription to the magazine.

strategygames.com

GAME REVIEWS

This is where we're going to put all our short game reviews. You'll be able to search for a game by title, or use the handy alphabetical index to find the title you want. Plus, it's here that you'll find the form you need to fill in if you want to submit a review of a favourite game. Be warned, though, we do reserve the right to edit reviews for spelling and grammar, or for legal reasons. Also, for reasons of space, we can only carry a certain number of reviews of each title.

BOOKS & VIDEO REVIEWS

We don't think you spend all of your time playing computer games. We think you enjoy reading good books and watching films and videos just as much as we do. So we've included an area on the site for brief reviews of the latest books we've been reading or videos we've been watching. If there's enough demand, we'll let PC Strategy Games readers recommend titles they

SUBSCRIBE

What can we say? We'd like you to subscribe to PC Strategy Games, because we think it's a great read and you shouldn't run the risk of having your local newsagent run out. Plus, Crimson Publishing Ltd has a number of other titles which you might be interested in. Take a look.

DRIVERS & UTILITIES

Our site carries a selection of indispensable utilities, including DirectX, Winzip, Paintshop Pro, Adobe Acrobat and Hypersnap.

GAMING LINKS

What it says on the tin, really – an alphabetical index of links to strategy game publishers, developers and sites dedicated to individual games. If you know of a site we haven't included, then e-mail us with the link.

NEWSLETTER

Every month, after the next issue of the magazine has gone to press, we'll put together an e-mail newsletter which will fill you in on what you can expect to see in it, and also what changes we may have made to the website. If you want to subscribe to it, then this is the place to go.

COMMUNITY

The big word in computer gaming at the moment, and one of the main reasons we've launched PC Strategy Games. We think that there are enough strategy gamers out there to form a community, if they could only talk to one another... Well, now they can. We've created a series of forums for gamers to start chatting about their favourite titles, the companies that make them, the people who develop them and other important issues. We've set up some general discussion groups, under a variety of headings and sub-headings: but it's going to be up to you to go online and create the actual threads, and let us know what you want to add. As with the reviews, we'll reserve the right to keep an eye on what's going on in a particular thread. We'll be putting a set of rules regarding suitable material to include in a posting, but remember that we won't necessarily be reading every message as soon as it goes on the site, so you'll have to help us police the forums to make them a safe and pleasant place to be. A community, in fact...

WHERE ARE WE COMING FROM?

Why did Crimson Publishing launch PC Strategy Games? What makes us think that we as a company have the track record to create a consumer computing title about such a specialist area? Well, for one thing, quite a few of our staff, including our managing director, have worked for strategy games publishers in the past, so they've got some inside knowledge about how the industry works – that's inside knowledge we're going to make use of to provide you with more in-depth articles than other magazines are going to be capable of.

WHO ARE WE?

You may think it's just vanity on our part, but readers have actually asked for more information about the team responsible for putting PC Strategy Games together. So we've fleshed out the mini-biographies that were in the magazine, and provided you with our details. The idea is that if you know more about our likes, dislikes and personal history, then you'll be able to work out which of us is more likely to take the same sort of approach as you.

That's what we've got on the site at the moment, but as I said above, we plan to keep on tinkering with it. For example, we'll probably add a section for reviews of boardgames, card games and other non-computer game related items. We're also planning to create an 'opponents wanted' section, where gamers will be able to post information about what games they play and how they play them, so they can find people online to play against. The whole point about the website is that it's supposed to be a place where people who like playing strategy games can easily find like minded others. So make sure you tell us what you'd like to see in it. But right now, why don't you log on to **www.pcstrategygames.com** and take a look at the site?

GAMES DIGEST

IMPRESSIONS GAMES has announced that Breakaway Games, who recently developed Sid Meier's Antietam, are nearing completion of The Pharaoh Official Expansion Pack: Cleopatra, to be published by Sierra in July. It will include 15 new scenarios (divided into four campaigns), challenging players to build the famous Lighthouse at Alexandria, protect the Pyramids from new enemies and battle alongside Mark Antony against Octavian at Actium.

THE SEQUEL to the very popular but graphically-challenged multiplayer space empire game Stars! is due for release soon. Being developed by Mare Crisium, the software company formed by the game's original developer Jeff McBride, it's called Stars Supernova! and is expected to offer much the same epic scope and depth of its predecessor – but with some rather nice looking graphics too. It's expected at the end of Q1.

MICROSOFT has announced that its DirectX drivers will soon be updated to version 8.0. This will provide greater support for both graphics and sound, the latter through the amalgamation of DirectSound and DirectMusic into a single, more powerful package. Real Time communication via a microphone across LANs and the Internet will be allowed with the incorporation of DirectPlayVoice.

TALONSOFT is currently working on a game called Panzer Brigade. Details are still sketchy and no firm release date has been set, but it is apparently a corps/division level World War 2 tank game.

Eidos goes Pyro-maniacal with three new releases

Up-and-coming Spanish developer Pyro, whose 1998 title Commandos sold well around the world, is to release three new titles – including Commandos 2 – towards the end of the year through Eidos in the UK.

Commandos 2 is one of the most anticipated strategy releases of the year. It incorporates a new rotatable map function to facilitate puzzle solving in the various 3D missions.

Squad members can now command vehicles, enter buildings, climb ropes and interact even more closely with the game environment, thanks to the incorporation of new game engines alongside a tweaked version of the main game interface.

The commandos themselves, including three brand new additions to the squad, are both less specialised and more adaptable, reducing the risk of frustrating restarts if a vital character is killed.

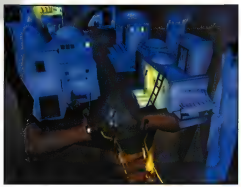
Fans will have to wait for Commandos 2 until at least August.

Also planned from Pyro is Praetorians, a 3D RTS set 2000 years ago in the Roman Empire (see movie on the cover disk, this issue).

Although Praetorians shares a number of similarities with the more traditional RTS, Pyro has stripped out certain elements that it claims impinge upon strategic gameplay. Three different campaigns – Gallic, Roman and Egyptian, in order of increasing difficulty – divided into 16 missions make up the single player game, but Pyro envisages Praetorians as being played predominantly in its online incarnation. To this end, a level editor will not be made available for public use – the company believes that too many players would be put off by DIY scenarios. Single player mode has been designed as a kind of tutorial, giving players the confidence to go online and face human combatants. The Romans are restricted to 10 unit types, while the Gauls and Egyptians boast 20 each. The combat engine uses a scissors-paper-stone system to determine the outcome of battles: each unit has strengths and weaknesses, enabling it to fight certain enemies with ease while succumbing quickly to others. Pyro aims to encourage a more strategic approach to gameplay. Figuring out the strengths and weaknesses of different troop formations is the key to success rather than the random distribution of resources.

The other Pyro game from Eidos is Heart of Stone, which the UK publisher is calling a genre-bending, highly colourful 3D adventure strategy set during the 16th Century. The player assumes the role of Michel, a young student who wants to investigate the mysterious death of his uncle, taking him to many different countries and confronting new characters. While the game makes use of a typical RPG-style puzzle-solving interface, real-time tactical combat is also a key element, one dependant upon the differing natures and capabilities of the various characters. Each character has unique skills and desires, set and controlled by the AI according to the developing action. Balancing the group, combining their skills and playing to their strengths – a kind of personnel management – must all be mastered for success.

Left and below: Three different genres, three different games



Cryo in Venetian online intrigue

Paris-based Cryo Interactive has revealed that it intends to enter the online arena with news of the forthcoming launch of Venice, a multiplayer strategy game. Set in 16th Century Venice (complete with famous landmarks such as St Mark's Square), players must accumulate wealth and form political alliances with the ultimate goal of becoming mayor of the city. As with Segasoft's 10Six, the online world is permanent – alliances must be struck with other virtual inhabitants to ensure that, on returning to the game, players do not find that they have lost money or influence while offline.

Venice's economy is highly complex, enabling players to act as merchants, manufacturers or Art dealers while putting together a political campaign to sweep them to power, and virtual scenarios will be introduced each month. The game will retail at £34.99, including six months' free online play; after this expires, there will be a monthly fee to stay in the online game. Venice has been developed by Cryo Networks, Cryo's internal online production subsidiary, using its own in-house programming language, SCOL, which apparently enables 3D graphics to be quickly downloaded even by low-spec machines. Although SCOL has been used in several Internet applications, Venice represents its first use in online gaming. After acquiring Dreamcatcher Interactive, Cryo has agreed a distribution with Titus Software Corp (which owns the Interplay brand) with a view to increasing the French company's US sales to 20% of total turnover by the end of the year.

STRATEGY GAMES: Forthcoming Releases

All release dates are subject to change; none is guaranteed.

APRIL

10Six SegaSoft (online)
Allegiance (On-line) Microsoft
Business Tycoon Stardock/Ubisoft
Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun – FireStorm Westwood/EA
Empire of the Ants Microids
Ground Control Massive /Sierra
Invictus Interplay
Majesty: Sovereign of Ardania Cyberlore/Hasbro Interactive
Player Manager 2000 Anco
Shadow Watch Red Storm Entertainment
Star Trek: Armada Activision
Star Wars: Force Commander LucasArts/Activision
Stars Supernova Mare Crisium/Empire
Sudden Strike CDV
Terminus Vicarious Visions
UEFA Manager 2000 Bubball Systems/Infogames
Venice Cryo Networks/Cryo Interactive (online)
Wall Street Tycoon Lumis/UbiSoft

MAY

B-17 Flying Fortress: The Mighty Eighth Wayward/Hasbro Interactive
Battle Realms Liquid/Crave Entertainment
Conquest: Frontier Wars Digital Anvil/Microsoft
Dark Reign 2 Pandemic Studios/Activision
Destroyer Command SSi/Mindscape
Earth 2150 TopWare Interactive/Mattel Media
Fading Suns: Noble Armada Ripcord Games
Iron Strategy Nikita
Metal Fatigue Psygnosis/GT Interactive
Reach for the Stars Mindscape/Mattel Media
Rogue Spear: Urban Operations Red Storm Entertainment
Shogun: Total War Electronic Arts
Starlancer Digital Anvil + Warthog/Microsoft
Submarine Titans Ellipse Studios
Wargames: Retribution Interactive Studios/MGM Interactive

JUNE

ATC 2000 PC Aviator/Aerosoft
Dogs of War Silicon Dreams/Talonsoft
Kingdom Under Fire Phantagram/GOD
Tachyon: Beyond the Fringe Novalogic
Warhammer 40,000: Agents of Death Mirage Media

JULY

Pharoah: Cleopatra Impressions/Sierra
Sim City 3000 Unlimited Maxis/Electronic Arts

3RD QUARTER

Arabian Nights Cryo Interactive
Battle Isle IV Cauldron/Blue Byte
Brother against Brother Matrix
Chessmaster 8000 Mindscape
Civil War Generals III Impressions/Sierra
Civilisation 3 Firaxis
Commandos 2 Pyro Studios/Eidos Interactive
Harpoon 4 SSi/Mindscape
Heart of Stone Pyro Studios/Eidos Interactive
Homeworld: Cataclysm Relic/Sierra
Panzer General Assault II: Eastern Front SSi/Mindscape
Pools of Radiance SSi
Sid Meier's Dinosaurs Firaxis
Silent Hunter II SSi/Mindscape
Starship Troopers Blue Tongue/Hasbro Interactive
SWAT 3: Battle Plans Sierra
U.F.S. Vanguard Red Storm Entertainment
Warlords Battlecry SSi/Mindscape
Wars of Napoleon 1805 – 1815 Matrix
Warzone 2120 Eidos Interactive

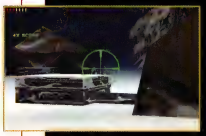
4TH QUARTER

Age of Empires II: Expansion Pack Ensemble/Microsoft
Alien Breed: Conflict Team 17
Black and White Lionhead/Electronic Arts
Close Combat V Atomic/Mindscape
Economic War Monte Cristo Multimedia
Freedom: First Resistance Red Storm Entertainment
Freelancer Digital Anvil/Microsoft
Gangsters 2 Eidos Interactive
Giants Planet Moon/Interplay
Monopoly Tycoon Deep Red/Hasbro Interactive
Napoleon: Empire Builder Talonsoft/Take 2 Interactive
Praetorians Pyro Studios/Eidos Interactive
Republic: The Revolution Elixir/Eidos Interactive
Roswell Conspiracies Red Lemon/Red Storm Entertainment
Settlers IV Blue Byte
X-Com Alliance MicroProse/Hasbro

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information in the above table, it is intended for guidance only. Games are subject to delay and cancellation, and all release dates, titles and publisher and developer information are subject to change. PCSG claims no responsibility for any inaccuracies that may later come to light.

GAMES DIGEST

SEATTLE-BASED Zombie Studios, developers of the popular Spec Ops, have been bought by Advanced Interactive Systems. Both companies have worked closely with the US military, and further combat simulation software is said to be in the pipeline. Zombie hope to benefit from AIS's marketing, sales and resources , while Zombie offer research and development capabilities in graphics and online gaming.



PAT WYATT, Mike O'Brien and Jeff Strain, three long-serving Blizzard developers with a host of credits on games including Starcraft, Diablo and Warcraft III, have left the company to form Triforge Inc. Although the new company has not yet released details of any projects, it is widely believed that it will continue to work within the fantasy/RPG genres.

TAKE 2 will create a single company from several of its design and programming subsidiaries. Broadband Studios Inc, based in London, will concentrate upon online gaming across all major gaming platforms, including the PC. No specific titles have yet been announced.

HASBRO HAS recently acquired the trading card, role-playing game and computer game rights to the best-selling series of Harry Potter books, written by British author JK Rowling. Warner Brothers is currently planning films based on the first two books, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone and Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.

Activision adds to Star Trek, still on board for Star Wars

Activision has announced a new addition to its Star Trek portfolio. Star Trek: Bridge Commander, set in the Star Trek: The Next Generation Universe, is currently in development at California-based Totally Games. Players adopt the mantle of captain aboard Sovereign class Federation vessels, commanding them from the bridge in over 30 different single player missions.

LIFE Sexy slaphead Patrick Stewart will provide the voiceover for Star Trek: Bridge Commander

Following a stellar catastrophe in one of the Federation's outposts, the USS Sovereign is called upon to assist the colonists from impending doom while simultaneously threatened by alien factions. Along with familiar friends and foes such as the Klingons, Ferengi and Cardassians, the game will also incorporate a new alien race.

Meanwhile, Simon Jeffery, the president of LucasArts, has dismissed recent reports that LucasArts was unhappy with Activision, its European distribution partners, over the latter's handling of European sales and the management of certain high-profile brands, including Star Wars.

"We are thrilled with the way that Activision has represented our brand in the UK," Jeffery said. "The people that have worked hard to represent [us] deserve to know that we are right behind them."

While Jeffery may deny reports of a rift with Activision, the latter appears not to be involved in the latest major computer game project to be based on the Star Wars universe, a massively multiplayer online game.

LucasArts has recently signed deals with Verant Interactive, creator of the record-breaking massively multiplayer game, Everquest (which boasts over 200,000 subscribers), and Sony Online Entertainment to produce the online multiplayer Star Wars game. The as-yet untitled game, scheduled for a 2001 release, will make use of familiar characters from the first film trilogy. Verant has already commenced programming, and when completed the game will be hosted exclusively online at The Station@sony.com.

Ironically, Totally Games has worked closely with LucasArts in the past on four different Star Wars titles, including TIE Fighter and Star Wars: X-Wing Alliance. Activision promises that Star Trek: Bridge Commander will be 'distinctly different from the X-Wing Series'. The game is scheduled for release early next year.

Matrix Games tells French Kamikaze: 'I want your hex'

Matrix Games, a US-based company which takes old computer games and updates them to take advantage of new PC technology, has bought the rights to republish a number of Second World War titles from French wargames publisher Kamikaze Games. To be published this year are three games — 1941: Operation Tycoon, 1942: Campaign for Malaya and 1945: Operation Konrad.

Matrix will expand the Kamikaze product line into a full series of Operational Level games, said Matrix president David Heath.

"These are good fun wargames," Heath said. "We felt this was an excellent engine to use for our Operational Level game series."

As St Nazaire-based Kamikaze's products were originally intended for hotseat or PBEM play only, Matrix is to programme AI for each game before releasing them as full Operation Level games, as well as updating sound and graphics and enabling online play.

Heath says that the company is looking to consolidate its position in the wargames market with the Kamikaze deal. It has previously remodelled and enhanced the SSI titles, Steel Panthers, Pacific War and War in Russia.

Matrix is also to publish two titles created for it by well-known wargames developer Frank Hunter, Wars of Napoleon 1805-1815 and Brother Against Brother, an ACW-set game. These are planned for release later this year.

Above: Matrix has made a speciality of rejuvenating hard core hex-based games

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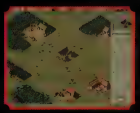
9/10 PC STRATEGY GAMER

"WHAT AoE11 SHOULD HAVE BEEN"



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SYSTEM: PC CD-ROM

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GAMES DIGEST

ELECTRONIC ARTS has signed partnership deals with US Communications Technology company Metromedia Fiber (sic) and its subsidiary, Abovenet Communication, with a view to creating an optical Internet structure that will improve the speed and quality of Internet connection. The dedicated fibre optic network, which will cover the whole of North America and Europe, will enhance connectivity and may have a beneficial effect on online gaming on the EA sites in the long term.

PROOF THAT GAMES can be played for profit as well as fun: game assets such as unique items and strong or experienced characters have become popular items on online auction sites. Recently, eBay reported that a level 66 Archer from Microsoft's online RPG, Asheron's Call, had fallen under the electronic hammer for the princely sum of $3000.

Liquid Craves Battle Realms

Liquid Studios is currently developing a real time strategy game, entitled Battle Realms, to be released through Crave Entertainment in summer next year

The game is set in a fantasy world of werewolves, ninjas and samurai where magic and martial arts go hand in hand. Players must take control of Kenji whom, after a seven-year exile, must return home and reclaim the Serpent Throne to which he is heir. The world boasts a living resource system – players actions have a direct effect on the environment which in turn affects strategic decisions – and a reactive AI that permits enemy units to interpret combat situations.

Crave has previously concentrated on console releases. Although this is Liquid's first production, the development team has worked on several high profile projects, including Ultima: Ascension, StarCraft and Blade Runner. The company, funded solely by Crave and established by Ed Del Castillo and Mike Grayford (who worked extensively on the Command and Conquer series at Westwood), recently celebrated its first birthday.

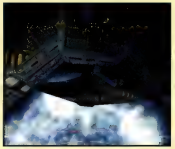
Next stop: Terminus

Ambitious US publisher Vicarious Visions is ready to release Terminus, a space combat and trading sim that appears heavily influenced by the classic game, Elite, in April.

Players can be bounty hunters, pirates or merchant traders, and will be able to upgrade their ships and weaponry as they amass money. Terminus features an innovative real-time economy system, realistic physics models and massive galactic maps to explore.

Although a single player option exists, the game, developed for Vicarious by Vatical Entertainment, is designed to played over the Internet in a persistent online universe.

Users of PC, Mac and Linux operating systems can all participate in the game together, as it has been programmed to function with all of the systems.



Terminus is the first of some 15 titles planned for release by Vicarious over the next 12 months.

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1	Tiberian Sun Firestorm (Electronic Arts)
2	The Sims (Electronic Arts)
3	Delta Force 2 (Novalogic)
4	Champ Man 99/00 (Eidos)
5	Age of Empires 2 (Microsoft)
6	Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun (Electronic Arts)
7	Rollercoaster Tycoon (Hasbro Interactive)
8	Theme Park World (Electronic Arts)
9	Grand Prix World (Hasbro Interactive)
10	Scrabble (Mattel Interactive)

*Based on most recent sales figures available

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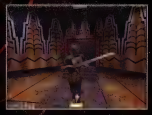

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Another staffer joins the Firaxis exodus

Yet another senior staffer at Sid Meier's company Firaxis has quit to join Big Huge Games, the new company formed by Firaxis co-founder Brian Reynolds.

Doug Kaufman, whose credits include Microprose's Civilisation II and Alpha Centauri for Firaxis, joins other ex-Firaxis names such as Tim Train (senior producer on Alien Crossfire) and David Inscore. Kaufman will focus upon the development of real-time strategy games.

While project details at Big Huge Games are still under wraps, Brian Reynolds has said that the company will concentrate on developing strategy games.

Meanwhile, Sid Meier has revealed more about how Civilisation III is taking shape at Firaxis.

Following the departure of Reynolds, who was to have headed the development, Meier himself and Firaxis co-founder Jeff Briggs are now overseeing production, design and programming on the whole project.

Following the advancements made in Alpha Centauri, diplomacy will play a much more important role in Civ III, while trade and commerce will also be overhauled, enabling players to engage in all kinds of financial wheeling and dealing to corner markets, set up business empires or become pirates.

New units and new combat systems will be incorporated into the warfare side of the game, including a new system of leadership and army management.

The whole game will undergo a radical graphical overhaul, accompanied by a new interface to facilitate gameplay.

Details of Sid's other current project for Firaxis, a dinosaur strategy game which he hopes to link in with Civ III and Alpha Centauri so that gamers can play through from the dawn of time to the evolution of the human race into a new species, will continue to be released via Sid's Dino Diaries, appearing on the Firaxis website.

Sid has also claimed that the exodus of staff from Firaxis has been entirely amicable, and that it has given younger programmers and developers at the company the chance to emerge.

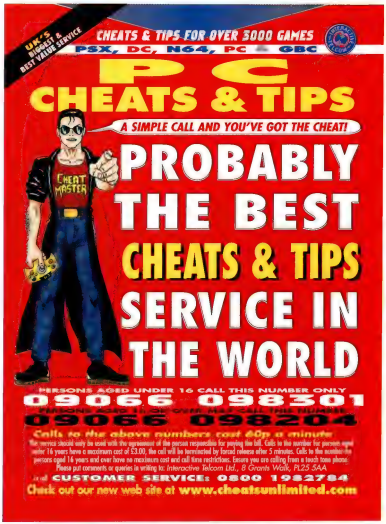
Civilisation III is still scheduled for release in September.

Below: Sid Meier is to start personally overseeing the Civilisation III project

Maxis adds World Edition of SimCity

Maxis is set to extend the life of SimCity 3000 with the announcement of a World Edition. The company already provides support online for the game through running monthly competitions, making new building designs available and running an online version of the original SimCity.

In SimCity 3000 Unlimited, players will now be able to incorporate hundreds of new buildings, including over 30 new landmark buildings based on well-known structures, in their unique towns with the addition of German and Asian building sets. Alongside a new Scenario Creator, 13 new scenarios – including the reunification of SimBerlin and a post-nuclear accident rebuilding programme – provide a new set of challenges for Sim mayors. Should players become bored, they can design new structures with an updated Building Architect Tool, or play God for a while, sending down plagues of locusts – one of four new disasters – upon the hapless Sims. The terrain is fully customisable, with tropical islands and craggy mountains now potential virtual building sites, while annual events such as Carnival and Christmas will transform the city. Despite the number of changes on offer, Maxis says the open-ended gameplay style will remain unaffected. The expansion pack is scheduled for an early summer release.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Letters

Love us or loathe us, we want to hear what you've got to say

WHAT, NO CHEATS?
Dear Martin,
I bought your new magazine PC Strategy Games and was quite impressed. I thought it was brill! The demo disk is good, too. But I was just wondering if you are going to do a demo of The Sims? Because I wouldn't mind trying it out. I also thought that it would be good if you did a cheats, hints and tips page in the back of your Mag.

Look forward to hearing from you.
Peter, via e-mail

PCSG Glad you liked it. To be honest, the team here is having a lot of fun producing the kind of magazine they'd want to read themselves, so it's good to hear other people like it, too! Re The Sims: there is no playable demo available, I'm afraid, because Electronic Arts says it would have to give the whole game away. There is a rolling demo, which we carried on the cover disk for Issue 2 (May 2000). For more Sims stuff, Electronic Arts and Maxis want people to go to the official site, www.thesims.com.

On your other point, we've already got a section where we carry advice on how to play different games, but I'm afraid we don't plan on including cheats or walkthroughs because we think they'd rather destroy the point of playing the games. Sorry!

Anyway, hope you liked issue 2 as much as you did issue 1.

NOT IN FRONT OF THE CHILDREN?
Hello,
I was optimistic at seeing the title of your new publication, PC Strategy Games, thinking that I wouldn't have to listen to the views of children in order to get a review of games. However, Damon Wilson's style in reviewing 'Rising Sun' shows me that I was mistaken. Can't say I'm a hard-core wargamer (though I did dabble when I was 16) but I do like the more cerebral offerings of the Talonsoft Games.

Of course I accept they're a minority taste but I don't really want to be insulted for enjoying them. Perhaps Master Wilson should go back to his Nintendo. It's an interesting marketing strategy — making a strategy magazine and insulting strategy gamers. Bravo and best luck for a prosperous future. See ya.
David Nicholas, via e-mail

Damon Wilson (aged 34 1/4) writes: I'm sorry if you (and other Talonsoft fans) feel personally insulted by my comments – I was criticising the game, not those who might play it. I do, however, stand by my contention that Rising Sun has a horribly clumping and outdated interface. I also stand by my assertion that extreme interest in the genre is needed to get past this major flaw in the game. And I've never owned a Nintendo in my life.

Above: Rising Sun – hard core, hex-based: not for everyone?

The Editor adds: *Damon is very much a strategy gamer – indeed, he is unbeaten in the intra-office multiplay AoEII ladder. I've had another look at his comments on Rising Sun, and I stand by them wholeheartedly. That's what he thought of the game. Personally, I found Rising Sun somewhat more playable than he did, although that's probably because I've played every one of Talonsoft's Battleground and Campaign Series. But even so, I am very aware that Rising Sun has a number of significant faults which are likely to make someone who isn't as into wargames as I am give up in disgust very quickly. As to the suggestion that we're insulting strategy gamers, I have to say that there are plenty of strategy gamers who wouldn't touch Rising Sun with a bargepole, because it's a hex-based traditional wargame.*

On a final note, three people review every game in PCSG. The main reason is so that games don't get unfairly dismissed on the basis of one person's opinion. But it also means that readers who don't like what one reviewer has written have two others to choose from. If Damon's views annoyed you so much, there's a simple solution. Don't read his comments. He won't mind.

Left: Sims in semi-naked kissing by the pool shock!

WOT, NO SPOTTY YOUTHS?
Dear Editor,
At last, a magazine with more than one article worth reading. I really enjoyed the mag – it makes a change to read pieces that are aimed at people over the spotty youth stage. The article on Age of Empires II even got me to buy it! I've always avoided these sorts of games, because I've always thought they were too much like C&C, which I detest.

PC STRATEGY GAMES Letter of the Month – Wonderful, Wonderful, Copenhagen!

Dear Editor,

Allow me to congratulate you on the first issue of PC STRATEGY GAMES.

I am definitely not your typical reader: I am a middle-aged female academic/intellectual, but I am also a gaming freak, and although I like a round of bloody, gore-splattering Unreal Tournament or Quake III every now and then, my favourite game genre is strategy, the much maligned RTS ('Command & Conquer Clones'), '4X' games, as well as the more peaceful ones (SimCity, The Sims, Pharaoh, etc.). To accompany me on the proverbial desert island, I would choose Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri/Alien Crossfire.

And it was like an unexpected extra Christmas present in the middle of March, when I found a whole new magazine dedicated to my favourite genre. Most of the gaming mags' reviewers criticise almost by definition any new RTS or 4X game for 'not bringing anything new to the genre' – sometimes it looks like strategy games are being criticised just for belonging to the genre! But strategy games are, in my opinion, much more varied than, for example, first person shooters. Reviewers fall over their own feet in their eagerness to praise HalfLife, Quake III Arena and Unreal Tournament – but if you think about it: these games are anything but original. Stay alive, grab bigger and meaner weapons, and shoot anything that moves ... if that is 'renewal', I don't understand why a good and entertaining RTS game like Dominion: Storm over Gift 3 gets all those bad reviews for 'lack of originality'.

By the way: Dominion should have a prize for being the most under-rated and over-criticised RTS game ever ... with the KKND series in close competition! And while originality, of course, is a good thing (if no one had been 'original' every now and then, we would still be living in the Dark Ages for real, and not only when we start a new round of Age of Empires II (about which I, by the way, am writing a Strategy Guide for a Danish publishing house) – it isn't everything. Recognising the familiar is a large part of the joy we get from many forms of entertainment, not only games, but also genre fiction, films etc. To illustrate: I love, for instance, good old-fashioned 'who-dunits', that take place in a British country mansion, and where everyone – the wife, the neighbour, all the heirs and, last but not least, the butler – has a good motive for murdering the old lord. I have read at least 50 of those novels, and I read every new one I can get my hands on.

In exactly the same way, I have played lots and lots of 'C&C clones' – building bases, gathering resources, mustering an army, annihilating the enemy – and lots and lots of '4X'-games, exploring, expanding, exploiting and exterminating my way through planets and galaxies. It is, in my opinion, not just a question of renewal – what matters is how well the old and familiar theme is presented. And while originality may be exciting, I will still grab the next 'C&C clone' or '4X' I find in my local retail store or online, even though it looks like more of the same – and if it is good, I will enjoy it just as much as the next 'Agatha Christie clone'! Keep up the good work... I'm already looking forward to the next issue!

Best regards

Hanne Steinicke, Copenhagen, Denmark

PCSG Not much we can say to that, Hanne, except that your argument is an excellent one. While originality is a very valuable thing, you're absolutely right that an unoriginal game can still be a very good one, if the execution of the idea is well done. The problem, though, is that too many game company executives seem to think that just copying the bare outlines of a plotline is enough to guarantee success – a point that our American correspondent Alan Emrich discusses in his column this month.

I'm a dyed-in-the-wool wargamer, I'm afraid... But after some initial reservations with AoEII, I am starting to get into it now.

Great mag — keep up the good work.

Steve, via e-mail

PCSG Good to hear that we managed to convince a self-confessed dyed-in-the-wool wargamer to try out different strategy games genres. Glad you liked the magazine, Steve: we'll try and deliver a quality product every month. But be sure to let us know if you think we've let you down.

Right: Quake III – completely unoriginal, but still great fun
Far right: It worked – our review of AoEII tempted at least one person to try it!

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Ground Control

Barry Ryan *goes to ground with Sierra's latest. But is it an RTS, an RTT or an RTC?*

GROUND CONTROL
DEVELOPER: Massive Entertainment
PUBLISHER: Sierra Studios
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: April 2000

Above: **Bigger and bolder and rougher and tougher**

Massive Entertainment's Ground Control is the latest example of an emerging RTS trend – games which do away with the resource management element which, up until now, has been so integral to the genre. LucasArt's Force Commander (also previewed this month) is another title which champions this approach. Is this a further dumbing down of a genre which is already hardly synonymous with intellectual rigour, or merely a stripping away of the wheat from the chaff to provide an altogether more playable game?

Some brave souls have even gone so far as to coin a new gaming acronym, RTC, or Real Time Combat, to cover the game mechanics of these titles. Others are using the term 'Real Time Tactical'. Of course, as all us hard-bitten gamers know, there's nothing new under the gaming sun, and titles such as Warhammer: Dark Omen or even Close Combat IV have already explored this area.

A new spin on RTS it may be, but the plot line is as hackneyed and cliched as ever. When is the gaming industry going to tire of post-apocalyptic, corporatist visions of the future? Ground Control provides us with the usual fare. Three centuries prior to our involvement with the tale, there's been a nuclear conflict on Earth. Naturally, this has left the planet in a parlous state.

Earth has become a chronically overpopulated Hell which makes Ridley Scott's Blade Runner cityscape look like a Merchant Ivory production. Earth-bound conflict has, rather sensibly, been proscribed and the major corporations now channel their aggressive-destructive urges into struggles over the myriad colonies which have sprung up all over the galaxy. Obtaining the raw human material necessary to fuel these colonising endeavours is relatively simple, as persuading people to leave the less than verdant surrounds of poor old mother Earth for pastures new is no challenge.

The two main rivals in the Ground Force universe are the Crayven Corporation and the Order of the New Dawn. Players get to control both of the factions in separate campaigns. The Crayven Corporation is the most aggressive, expansion-oriented corporation and consequently, as is the way with such things, are by far the largest and most successful. The Order of the New Dawn is a quasi-religious corporation and only the third largest on Earth in terms of size, represent the largest religious grouping in the known universe – over 700 million devotees can't be wrong, can they? In their case, God is most definitely on the side of the big battalions. These two take to fighting over a godforsaken rock in the Krig System – Krig 7b, to be precise, for reasons which emerge as the game progresses. Suffice it to say that the Order has discovered a secret uber-weapon which could result in some serious murder and mayhem if ever used.

The game is nicely wrapped, in a beautiful 3D engine, and the landscapes look very impressive indeed. The lighting effects and attention to detail enhance the look and feel

Above: Your meagre force attempts to protect a base from marauding raiders

– so, for example, tracked vehicles leave, well, tracks and kick up dinky little dust clouds. It's not long before you find yourself well and truly immersed.

TAKING A VIEW

The camera allows you to follow any unit you choose and it's got the full range of movement we've all come to expect — zoom in and out, rotate, change viewing angle. This is all done seamlessly and ensures that the already competent command and control system appears even more effortless in use. The game's engine, designed from scratch, features realtime shadows, particle explosions and dynamic lighting. And very nice it all is, too. As noted earlier, Ground Control does not concern itself with the tiresome business of base building and resource collection/management. Your forces are delivered to the battlefield from orbital dropships. Before the drop you'll get to outfit and tailor your force to the task at hand. Once they've been sent into the fray you're stuck with them, so you'll need to choose well.

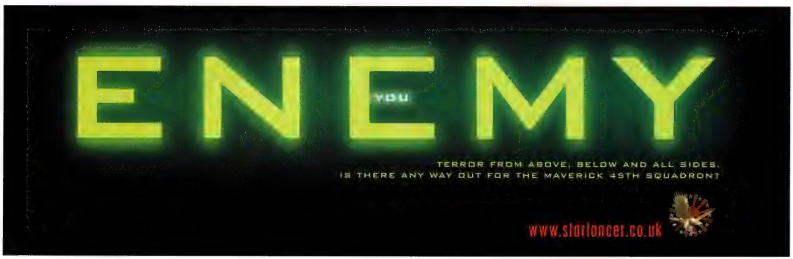
You can have multiple dropships (up to three in the most up-to-date review code) which you can use as reinforcements when the going gets tough, or perhaps even conceive multi-layered gradualist strategies which will see you feeding your forces into battle as and when required.

As per usual, each faction enjoys a slightly different technological aesthetic. The Crayven forces tend to favour conventional land-based units, known as Terradynes, while the Order of the New Dawn is fond of hover technologies, building Hoverdynes. Units come in all the usual flavours, with scout, light, main battle and heavy variants representing the core units of each force. Both forces also enjoy the services of three types of Aerodynes – attack, fighter and bomber. The Order doesn't get access to the bomber, which is an incredibly potent weapon. This is made up for by their drone unit, an automated creation which skulks about waiting for a Crayven unit to ambush.

Now, these days your average RTS will often incorporate aerial units. It's generally little more than window dressing, though. But the aerial units in Ground Control are nothing short of devastating. They are fast, potent and can be real game breakers when used correctly. Ground Control also incorporates an excellent unit development system which will see them becoming progressively more experienced as they move through the campaign. This should, unlike most RTS titles, encourage some sense of identification with the units under your command, and perhaps make you less inclined to squander them on ill-advised assaults. All this is very nice, but where Ground Control could shine, is in its innovative combat system. For example, units with a high stealth quotient will prove genuinely difficult to locate on the map. Stealthy units will also prove more difficult to hit with weapons fire. The astute commander will also learn to utilise the terrain to his advantage. Infantry units can move unhindered across any terrain, including mountain ranges. Areas of the map which are shadowed can provide excellent cover against marauding aerial units and camouflage, say, a large attack force. Your average RTS does not provide this sort of organic interaction. The levels may look nice, but genuine interactivity doesn't progress much further than burning down the odd tree of two. Ground Control forces you to remain aware of your surroundings at all times. Again, this may represent the new wave in RTS paradigms.

Earth 2150 (reviewed this month) offers fully deformable terrain and while Ground Control doesn't quite go this far, it does enough to represent a breath of fresh air. Massive Entertainment has also put a lot of time and effort into developing the multiplayer side of the game. Uniquely, (for an RTS) Massive plans to include a 'drop in' mode of play which will allow you to enter an already existing game.

Ground Control should represent an interesting spin on the by now rather tired RTS genre and may herald the way forward. We're looking forward to seeing finished code on this one. PCZ

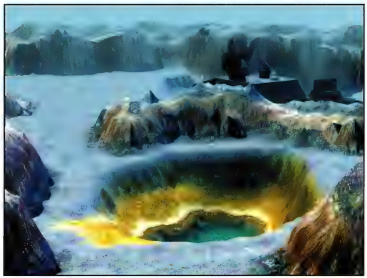


STARSHIP TROOPERS
DEVELOPER: Hasbro Interactive
PUBLISHER: Hasbro Interactive
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: Quarter 3 2000

Starship Troopers

***Martin Croft** is in extreme danger of losing his heart to... but, on reflection, let's not go there*

Above: More effective than a rolled up newspaper
Below: Doogie Howser MD is in there somewhere



Anyone who's expecting to see a Real Time Strategy game based on the cult film directed by Paul Verhoeven is going to be in for a shock when they take a look at these early development screen shots from Hasbro Interactive's upcoming Starship Troopers game.

Forget well-buffed perfect-toothed American High School teenagers taking on hideous giant acid and fire spitting arachnids while wearing nothing but Calvin Klein T-shirts: these Starship Troopers wear the latest in heavy metal gear – robotic fighting suits with built in jetpacks, rocket launchers, flamethrowers and probably portable toilets, if they're anything like the suits in the original classic science fiction novel that the film, the game and the CGI animation series currently running on the TV are based on.

Oh, and just for anyone who thinks powered armour or giant fighting robots are a recent invention, the original Starship Troopers book, written by Robert Heinlein, one of the most prolific and best authors of the so-called Golden Age of Science Fiction, came out in 1959, and featured computer controlled armour (complete with head-up displays) which could be dropped from orbiting spaceships. The suits were inside drop pods covered with ablative skins which burnt off one by one as the pod came through the atmosphere, and small sockets which could slow down descent until the last shell broke away and the suit could descend the last few feet under its own power.

Nuked and Bombed

Verhoeven took the original book, stripped out the powered suits, kept the basic plotline and played up the story's fascistic elements to make what is in fact an excellent parody of war films of the last 50 years.

Unfortunately, though, it threw away what was most interesting for gamers – the suits and a whole set of 'Mobile Infantry' tactics which they allowed, the arguments for a military-run state and even the inter-species politics. Yes, politics: the bugs weren't completely alien in the original book and, in fact, at the end our hero, Johnny Rico, looks forward to a day when bugs and humans can

Above left to right: Join the army and visit interesting new planets! Meet strange new bugs! Kill them!

live in peace. Also, at the beginning of the novel, the bugs have allies, a race of tall humanoids the humans call the Skinnies, who later switch sides.

The CGI series currently on TV is something of a halfway house between the two: while it's got something of the film's gung ho cheerleaders in battle about it, it also uses the powered suits. It seems to have developed the ideas in the book a little further, as well: in the original novel, there were references to Starship Troopers (particularly engineers) using heavy suits, but none were described in real detail. In the animated series, the squad now contains at least one heavy suit.

Judging from the information that's available about the Hasbro Interactive project, the new game should include far more from the book and from the CGI series than from the film, although it looks like Hasbro is trying to fit the game in with the film by claiming that it is set later, when Earth's forces have developed better protection against the bugs.

Every part of the game universe is rendered in fully-interactive 3D, which will allow players to zip around the battlefield looking at things from a wide range of perspectives.

It looks from the screens as if the game incorporates some of the ideas from the original book, including the concept of attack 'on the bounce' - in other words, with infantry literally leapfrogging forwards, with each soldier laying down instant covering fire for the ones behind as he (or she) lands, and then immediately jumping off again.

Incidentally, the venerable American boardgame company Avalon Hill, which Hasbro bought last year, released an extremely good hex-based tactical wargame based on the original book back in the mid 1970s (as well as a not-so-good game based on the Verhoeven film). It looks as if some of the design mechanics from that game may have been incorporated in the new computer version.

From a third person perspective, the player will control a company of infantry made up of a Captain, three lieutenants and a variable number of other ranks. As company members are killed or otherwise rendered hors de combat, rookie troopers will fill out the ranks. Assuming that troopers can survive, they will (hopefully) learn something from each skirmish and battle they take part in and get better at killing bugs.

The longer a trooper can survive, the higher up the chain of command he or she will progress. As troopers get promoted, they will be allowed to use different sorts of powered armour.

In the single player campaign, battles take place on a number of different planets with radically different terrain and climactic conditions. In multiplayer games, there's a skirmish mode which will allow gamers to control either the Mobile Infantry or the Bugs. And while there will also be a strategic level game, details of this are currently unclear.

As yet, we haven't seen a great deal more than a half a dozen screens, so it's difficult to tell what the finished product is going to be like. But the development team can deliver something that works on screen but is also closer to the feel of the original Starship Troopers, then they're likely to make strategy gamers at least very happy, whatever fans of the recent film might think.

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PLAYER MANAGER 2000
DEVELOPER: Anco
PUBLISHER: 3DO
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: April 2000

Player Manager 2000

*Our resident substitute, **Mark Shaw**, looks at the latest footy management game*

The Premiership is coming to a climax, while the various European Championships are beginning to generate interest after the dour league stages have come to an end and Euro 2000 is just around the corner, so there's plenty for football fans to get excited about. But armchair managers who need even more of a dose of their favourite game can look forward to a summer of virtual soccer on the PC, as a number of new management games are about to be released. First on the pitch is Anco, re-entering the fray with Player Manager 2000, the latest edition to its long-running franchise.

NUMBER CRUNCHING

The key to winning matches in PM2K (as it shall henceforth be known) is the careful analysis of the large number of 'real-time' statistics that are generated by the virtual performance of both teams on the pitch and using these to make adjustments to the style of play, formation and so on. Continually updated and accessible throughout the match, these statistics are the heart of the game. Shaping your team in your own image should prove to be one of the more satisfying aspects of all games of this type, and PM2K is no different.

Playing to your strengths and exploiting the opposition's weaknesses are made easier by the way in which the graphical interface affords the player a number of different ways of viewing the action, including a scanner mode and a 3D view. Rather than streams of numbers, the visual feedback this generates enables managers to keep an eye on how each match progresses. Every player can be watched to see how he is performing within the context of the team, how much of the pitch they cover (and how effectively), who they're passing to, how many of their shots are on target (and how many end up in row Z) and so on. If a player isn't up to the task, it's time to bring on a fresh pair of legs, and if the available replacements aren't good enough, managers can search a database of over 30,000 players from most of the world's major leagues.

As well as key attributes, hidden statistics also operate, which means that no matter how carefully transfers are planned, there is always an element of risk involved.

3DO have consulted the Rothman's Guides, their Euro equivalents and myriad fanzines to provide these statistics, the aim being to transform names and numbers into more rounded individuals. Sure, Ronaldo can play a bit, but stick him in a non-Portuguese speaking team in the North of England and see how well he performs... And, in a move that guarantees Eileen Drewery a different kind of immortality, it's even possible to appoint Faith Healers as part of the backroom staff.

The training options are extensive and varied, covering both team and individual players. These screens can also be used to test out new and young players. Various bars and graphs are used to display change as players improve over time (assuming that training is going well and that players are neither too old nor prone to extended Darren Anderton-esque periods of injury). Teamwork, set pieces, recovery and pre-season training options are all present and correct.

Below: Plan your tactics carefully... **Bottom:** and then watch as your team hammers in the goals

What will certainly be of great interest to all armchair managers is the extent to which team tactics are customisable; indeed, it is the team tactics screen that is the engine of the game – mastering this is the key to winning. If you can devise a set of tactics that your team is capable of performing and that are not cancelled out by the opposition's tactics, the trophy cabinet will soon be spilling over with silverware. Easier said than done...

While there is currently no multi-player option, Anco intends to run a number of online leagues from their website. As from May, teams may be uploaded to different leagues and compete in virtual championships (and for real prizes).

So, PM2K certainly has the right credentials, but a number of questions need to be asked: does the interface help or hinder budding managers? Has the development team managed to strike a balance between stats and playability? Does Player Manager 2000 pose a serious threat to Championship Manager 2's crown, or can the two co-exist peacefully, side by side? Detailed answers to questions like this are going to have to wait for a full review in a future issue of PC Strategy Games; until then, though, you can make up your own mind with the demo on our cover-mounted disk.

WHOEVER SAID 22ND CENTURY SPACE COMBAT WAS FAIR?

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FROM ERIN AND CHRIS ROBERTS, CREATORS OF THE WING COMMANDER AND PRIVATEER SERIES

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Overdue games are like city buses: you hang around for what seems years, then three pull up in a row. PC gamers have been waiting literally years for Daikatana (John 'Doom' Romero's hand-crafted first-person shooter), Shogun (the 3D empire-builder set in feudal Japan) and Force Commander (the Star Wars RTS). Regular 'teaser' previews in magazines would start readers drooling, but the arrival dates slipped and slipped, and public interest naturally waned. Now, when just about everybody thought that their wheels must have fallen off, all three hove into view in a line.

The first to hit the shops will be LucasArts' Star Wars: Force Commander. Originally signalled back in 1997, this game was going to be a ground-based, overhead (Command & Conquer-style) real-time strategy game based in the Star Wars Universe. 'Replay the Battle of Hoth on your desktop', was the tempting promise, but the game ran into delay after delay – and then the 3D card revolution started.

OUT WITH THE OLD

So, Force Commander was heavily reworked, throwing-out much of its original conceptualisation. Everything in the game was redesigned to be 3D – right down to the briefing session before each mission. Indeed, much of the heated interest generated by the game over 1998 and early 1999 centred on this fact. At the time, very few fully 3D games were in the offing and a 3D Command & Conquer-esque game that let you order Han, Chewie, Luke, Leia, C3PO and R2D2 about sounded like a gamer's fevered fantasy.

But LucasArts took too long over the project, and the market is now littered with 3D RTS games (Imperium Galactica II, Battlezone II and Homeworld to name just three). Also, the dismally boring Star Wars: Supremacy has taken some of the gilding off LucasArt's previously unblemished crown; the master has been seen to be capable of making blunders...

So what does SW: Force Commander offer to put its competitors in the shade? 'Not much,' you might think at first sight.

Clockwise from top: With AT-ATs, Scout Walkers and Snowspeeders to command, Star Wars: Force Commander will make kids of us all again. The force is strong with this one...

STAR WARS: FORCE COMMANDER
DEVELOPER: Lucas Arts
PUBLISHER: Activision
PROJECTED RELEASE DATE: Out now

Wars: Force Commander

*Is the force strong with Activision? **Damon Wilson** unsheaths his light sabre and finds out...*

The once vaunted 3D graphics look plain and even dated by modern standards (the trees on the Endor missions, for example, are not solid, rounded objects, but are made of two flat images crossed over in the middle like cardboard props). The maps have textured terrain, night, day and weather effects, as well as line-of-sight fog-of-war. But what similar games don't? There is a cinematic camera for zooming your view about but, again, this was news two years ago.

If Star Wars: Force Commander has any chance of winning the battle for serious strategy gamers' wallets, it will have to do so on the basis of gameplay. Fortunately, LucasArts look to have regained their old form, and Force Commander has some innovative features that could add whole new possibilities to RTS gaming.

For a start, the developers of SW: FC prefer to define it as a real-time *combat* game. They stress that it demands no resource management and no base design elements – just letting the player rush straight in and fight. One could say that they were being disingenuous over this issue, but (perhaps uniquely for games developers) they are simply not blowing their own trumpet hard enough.

Instead of having to fiddle about with mines and factories, the player has to kill enemies and capture buildings to get command-points (the game's equivalent of money). These can then be used to buy more units and base buildings. Yes, there are also base buildings, but their placement is predetermined as you buy them which means you won't be losing any battles because your gun emplacements are on the wrong hill.

This may all seem like dumbing-down, but by implementing such a simple resource system, the designers have opened the way for much deeper and more complex fighting strategies.

For example, the standard RTS tactic of building a lot of cheap units at the start of the mission and piling into the enemy to destroy their half developed base won't work here. You will lose dozens of storm troopers, each racking up the enemy's command points, and you will have little or nothing to show for it when the smoke clears.

Quote

From a strategy point of view this game holds a lot of promise

So, combat in Force Commander will involve well-aimed strikes, intended to take and hold buildings (which slowly accumulate more command-points if you can keep them) but you will have to balance territory gain with the potential casualties. Like real war, you may win the ground, but the acquisition won't make-up for your troop losses (notable examples being Stalingrad, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Chechnya).

You will also need to scout enemy dispositions before you even build up your force (let alone attack) so you can work out what type of units will give you the winning edge. For example, the giant, camel-like AT-ATs (seen in The Empire Strikes Back) pack enormous firepower, but field them against Rebel snow speeders and they will be tripped and resting on their chins before you can tell them to halt. So, AT-ATs should be protected with anti-aircraft walkers if your scouts spot Luke and his mates buzzing about.

Below **We're going in – full throttle**

Another promising idea (borrowed from Age of Empires II) will be the ability to garrison up to six troopers in buildings and vehicles. An unmanned building can be instantly taken by whoever wanders in the front door, but if manned there will be a brutal – if unseen – gunfight. Utilising limited forces on defence duty could earn you more command-points than an attack if your enemy is the gung-ho type.

Billeting troops in vehicles is also a good idea if you have enough to spare. Specialists – like Chewbacca and the Rebel Infiltrator units – can sneak into enemy vehicles and take control. What would Lord Vader say if you had to report being defeated by your own AT-ATs?

From a strategy point-of-view, Star Wars: Force Commander holds a lot of promise. Whether it delivers depends on two major factors: the enemy AI and the level design. Unfortunately, we aren't in a position to comment on these elements, because LucasArts has a strict policy of only letting reviewers play finished and boxed games, and we haven't yet been allowed loose on Force Commander ourselves – we've had to watch over a LucasArts representative's shoulder while he played the game. We'll have a full and detailed review as soon as we get the finished game. PCZ

Jeux sans frontiers

Online gaming is set to take off soon in the UK. ***Barry Ryan*** *investigates.*

Computers are wonderful things. They've completely revolutionised society in less than half a century. They've fundamentally altered basic modes of human communication, radically affected both the work and home environment and led to tectonic shifts in all major fields of scientific enquiry. Naturally, being essentially frivolous creatures with no concept of the larger historical and social significance of such a miraculous development, large swathes of humanity remain content to use these wondrous devices for... well, games.

Of course, as a species, we tend to be incredibly competitive. This facet of our genetic make-up didn't take long to filter into even the most primitive, protean examples of the computer game, with Pong allowing us to indulge our aggressive competitive urges against another player from the very start of the computer games industry.

With the home computer revolution in the 1980s, it wasn't long before we were testing our mettle against other players (sharing the same keyboard, of course) and battling it out against the primitive AI routines which (barely) passed for a computer opponent on a regular basis.

Now, as any long-time gamer knows, no matter how good any given game's AI may be, nothing comes close to testing your abilities against a human opponent. Competing against another gamer, who will come to a game with his/her unique playing style, personal quirks and glorious unpredictability, provides a real test. It leads to the evolution and exploration of strategies and gameplaying styles which would never even be considered when playing against an AI opponent.

Indeed, many would argue that multiplayability represents the sternest test of any game. Playing against a computer can constitute a soulless experience on many different levels. On normal or medium difficulty, games tend to be too easy, or at least easily beatable once you've discovered the inevitable Achilles heel. Any higher setting, and the machine seems to develop an infallible prescience which quickly renders a game unplayable.

Online game finders

Getting online to play games has never been easier. You don't need to be a rocket scientist or the possessor of a computer science degree to get your online gaming kicks. Now, with games like Quake III and Unreal Tournament shipping with their own integral master server lists, you have no excuse. But if you still need some hand-holding, there are two very nice pieces of software which can quickly sort the wheat from the chaff and have you playing the games you want to play, on the fastest available server, in double quick time. These little gems are the online game finders GameSpy (www.gamespy3d.com) and pingtool (www.pingtool.com).

These utilities will search out active servers for supported games and create a global list, complete with essential information such as ping numbers, frag limits and mods in use (if any). This will allow you to join the game of your choice. Both utilities come complete with filters which allow you to screen out irrelevant games on the basis of, say, high ping numbers. This can be a great time-saving device and ensures that you see only those games that are relevant to you.

They both support an extensive number of games, ranging from Quake III to Battlezone. GameSpy caters to a larger number of titles than PingTool, but that is largely because it has been around for a longer period of time. Both game finders' lists continue to grow each day.

What's more, both programs are easily downloadable from the sites mentioned above and weigh in at about 1.5Mb, which will hardly make a dent in your hard drive space. The big difference is that PingTool is freeware – you'll get full functionality from the moment you fire it up. The problem with GameSpy is that you're going to have to pay around $20 to get access to all the features you'll need. GameSpy has been around for a while now, and has frankly become a little flabby and out of shape – its interface is muddy and it's quite slow. PingTool is the young Turk, the new kid on the block and, for my money, it currently represents a better bet than GameSpy.

Consoles were, for a long time, the only realistic way of circumventing this shortcoming. Inviting your mates round for a session on, say, the latest football or driving game allowed you to express your competitive urges in a vaguely socially acceptable manner. It also re-instated one of the fundamental attractions of the general gaming experience — that it is an excellent group activity, which at its best can represent one of the best social experiences available.

Above: Internet cafes provide PCs and players

ALL THE COOL KIDS ARE DOING IT

Of course, this is something board and pen-and-paper gamers have known for years. The image of the lone gamer sitting alone in a darkened room, illuminated only by the ghostly glow of the monitor, has become common currency of late, but it's about as far removed from the wider gaming experience as you can get.

But the arrival of the World Wide Web completely changed the computer gaming landscape and re-introduced us to the joys of mutiplaying.

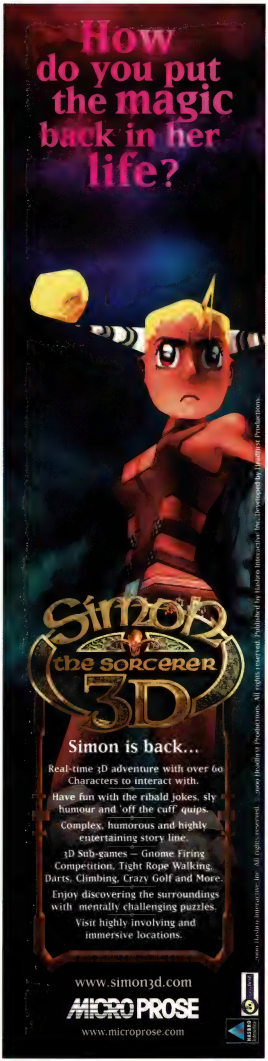
More recently, as offices and even homes get cabled up with Local Area Networks, there has been astronomical growth in LAN-based multiplayer gaming. This has driven the evolution of many an Internet cafe into a games salon, such as The Playing Fields in London, with dozens of machines linked together.

But multiplay would still be only in its infancy if it weren't for one game in particular – ID's epoch-making Doom. Ironically, its multiplay component was begun as a side project, a sort of interesting and diverting experiment. It wasn't long before it became the only game in town. We're all familiar with the tales of office networks collapsing under the stress of innumerable Doom games running simultaneously. This led, inevitably, to the banning of the game on many companies intranets.

Doom introduced us to the possibilities that the web offered for multiplayer games, and the games industry hasn't looked back since. The incorporation of a multiplay capability is now de rigeur and, indeed, we've recently seen over the emergence of Internet-only games such as Quake III, Unreal Tournament and Ultima Online. Some commentators have even speculated that the days of the single-player only game are numbered.

For the strategy gamer, the multiplay revolution now offers a rich and varied smorgasbord of possibilities. How you choose to indulge your online urges is completely down to you and your own personal tastes.

For the dedicated follower of RTS, there is an avalanche of multiplayer options to choose from. ▸▸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The cream of the online multiplay crop

STARCRAFT/BLIZZARD

This is one of the finest online resource management RTS games that you could (and still can) play on the web. It boasts a long pedigree that goes back as far as one of the very first RTS games, Warcraft: Orcs and Humans – this was indeed one of the first PC games to incorporate an effective multiplay element. It is both fast and frenetic, but also contains a reasonable dollop of genuine strategic level play. Starcraft is a very finely balanced game and this is reflected in the beautifully accessible, instantly playable, multilayered multiplayer experience that it still provides to this day.

TOTAL ANNIHILATION/TA: KINGDOMS/CAVEDOG

Total Annihilation picked up the baton handed on by Command & Conquer and ran with it. The resultant game has one of the most exhaustive and in-depth arrays of unit types available. The maps are sprawling and well designed, with an eye very firmly on multiplayer possibilities. The action takes place on land, sea and air; for a long time, Total Annihilation was the premier online gaming experience. TA: Kingdoms, its fantasy based spin off, offers a greater choice of factions and a more clearly differentiated unit choice, but it strangely constitutes a less complete multiplay experience.

AGE OF EMPIRES II/MICROSOFT

Microsoft's historically based RTS represents a brilliant online challenge. This is largely due to the unique attributes conferred on the various races, including the culture-specific bonus units. Each culture demands a markedly different approach and can facilitate completely different styles of play. Some players favour defensive strategies while others take a more offensive approach. It boasts fantastically complex research and development trees, it looks great and it also comprises relatively decent trade and diplomacy elements. These significantly enhance the multiplay experience.

ROGUE SPEAR/RED STORM

Red Storm's Rogue Spear is the classic example of a game which really comes into its own in a multiplay context. It's a tense, ultra-realistic combat simulation that facilitates a number of different styles of play. You can play in straight-forward adversarial mode, but that really misses the point. Rogue Spear is all about co-operative, closely co-ordinated team play. It's in this mode that it really shines. It also requires a great deal of tactical thinking and strategic appreciation. It's a brilliant antidote to the mindless fragfests that proliferate across the online gaming community.

ULTIMA ONLINE/EVERQUEST/ASHERON'S CALL

These games are the spiritual successors to the seminal text-driven role playing game, MUD (Multi User Dungeon). They take a slightly different approach to online gaming and are all about creating and propagating a vibrant online community. Each has a subtly different individual approach – which one you prefer is down to how you like your RPG served up. They are incredibly complex, vast multiplayer worlds which give a tantalising insight into where online gaming can take us in the coming years.

COMMAND & CONQUER: TIBERIAN SUN/WESTWOOD

It's the granddaddy of them all. Total Annihilation has more units and, pound for pound, that game represents a better overall gaming experience. But Command & Conquer has a irresistible simplicity and sheer playability which renders it an ideal online game. Tiberian Sun really refined the multiplayer possibilities offered by the franchise and the recently released add-on pack, Firestorm, has moved the game on even further with the addition of an entirely new multiplayer mode, the World Domination tour.

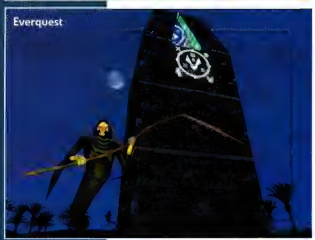
UNREAL TOURNAMENT GT INTERACTIVE/HALF-LIFE TEAM FORTRESS

OK, OK. I'm going to have to justify this one a little. Neither of these games represents the type of thing that we normally cover in PCSG. Obviously, both are fine games in their own right and, on a personal level, I love 'em both to death. But neither represents what you might call the stiffest tactical or strategic challenge. But a transformation occurs in a multiplay environment. The Half-Life Team Fortress add-on, with its emphasis on team play and co-operative missions, can be every bit a strategic challenge as Rogue Spear or Hidden & Dangerous, albeit considerably more frenetic and substantially less realistic. The same can be said for the Capture the Flag and domination modes in Unreal Tournament. Proof positive that multiplay has the capacity, simply by including co-operative, team-based play, to enhance the IQ of any given game by a considerable degree. Strange that.

You can engage in battle against fellow devotees of widely varying ages, abilities and backgrounds in games ranging from the most recent – such as Microsoft's Age of Empires II: Age of Kings – right back to some of the early RTS pioneers such as the original Command & Conquer or Warcraft games.

Indeed, one of the best online RTS experiences is undoubtedly Blizzard's ageing but fantastically online-friendly Starcraft (as this month's profile subject, Theme Park creator Demis Hassabis, will testify).

If squad based games are your thing, there's a number of opportunities available.



On the lower end of the strategic scale, there's Half Life Team Fortress, which gives you the opportunity to play a role in a squad of crack commandos, attempting to, among other things, capture the flag, wipe out the other teams, dominate the arena etcetera.

There are a huge number of squad-based game variations available and all are extremely playable, but perhaps the best we've seen is the recent 'protection' missions where one player gets to play an unfortunate unarmed 'mark'. Other teams will attempt to take you out while your own protection squad attempts to guide you to safety. Brilliant.

Needless to say, Rogue Spear, a game

Fall in gaming costs

Online gaming in Britain is severely restricted by one major factor: the cost. The ruinous expense of connecting-up (even at local call rates) has meant that for a long time the only games commonly played online in this country were turn-based or even play-by-mail.

To save themselves from debt-slavery to British Telecom (not that much of an exaggeration – some early MUD players racked up phone bills of many thousands of pounds during the 1980s), players opted for games where they could log on, upload and download the latest moves and then log off again.

But just a few thousand miles away, Americans were connecting up to the net and playing real-time games for days without incurring any extra cost to the annual flat rate sum they paid for local calls. Note the term 'flat-rate'. Many UK consumers believe the Americans get 'free' local rate calls: more accurately, they are paying for them, but as a component part of their monthly line rental charges.

Fortunately, it looks as if we'll soon have a wide range of flat-rate phone services and even some completely free ones available to us in the UK. British Telecom, after years of proclaiming that it was financially impossible to run a flat-rate internet service in this country, has suddenly changed its tune – after two rival telecommunications companies announced that they were going to do just that.

BT is now hurrying to catch-up and hoping, presumably, that we consumers won't hold the past against them, now we have so much choice opening up to us. Some hope...

The beginning of the change was signalled by UK governmental moves to further deregulate the telecommunications industry in February this year, allowing customers even greater access to phone providers. Within weeks, AltaVista, the internet service company, announced unlimited, unmetered, flat-fee paid Internet use for customers who signed-up for phone access with them. Telecoms and cable operator NTL followed with a similar offer and others, like Freeserve, the Dixons Group-owned advertising financed ISP, claim to be working on even better deals for the consumer.

As if this overnight change of fortune were not joy enough for web users, EU member states are committed to pushing down the cost of internet use across Europe. State economists have finally woken up to the tremendous wealth-promoting power of the internet and now say that those nations which can achieve healthy levels of e-commerce in the next few years will ensure prosperity for maybe decades to come. Those that miss the boat, on the other hand, are going to be in a less happy state.

Still, as with all newly opened buyer's markets, the would-be 24-hour-on-line-fiend is advised not to sign up to anything too hastily – as the competition heats up, bargains are likely to become common.

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SOME SELECTED CHARGES FOR 24-HOUR, SEVEN-DAY-A-WEEK ACCESS TO THE WEB:

British Telecom SurfTime - £19.99/month = £239.88/year.

AOL - £9.99/month or £99.99/year

Freeserve Time - Free internet access, provided you use Freeserve as your ISP, British Telecom as your phone provider and spend more than £10/month on your phone bill.

Tempo/Localtel - Free evening and weekend web access provided the user subscribes to screaming.net, the free ISP owned by electrical stores group Tempo, and uses Localtel as a phone service provider.

AltaVista - No fee and no time charge for web access, provided you sign-up with AltaVista as your telephone service provider.

NTL - No fee and no time charge for web access provided you sign-up with NTL as your telephone service provider.

Damon Wilson

which really comes into its own in multiplay mode, is also an online favourite – even more so with the new multiplay enhancements provided by the new Urban Op's expansion pack (see review, this issue).

You can also play a full range of Classic games online, including chess, backgammon, Go, mah-jong and Diplomacy. And if all that weren't enough, you can dabble with play by e-mail games (PBEM), a development of the venerable Play By Mail (PBM) hobby, which has been around for 40 years or more.

However you play, whatever you play, it is absolutely essential that you get online and take the plunge. It will fundamentally alter the way you view the whole gameplaying process and will open up whole new vistas. There's a lot of hype surrounding online gaming at the moment, and at this stage of the game, a lot of it is hyperbole. If, like me, you've experienced the indignity of being fragged by an 11 year old from Utah because your ping rates were astronomical, or had a four hour session of AoEII crash out just as you were about to administer the coup de grace, you'll know that online gaming, particularly for UK gamers grappling with a creaking telecoms infrastructure, is not without its pitfalls.

But the good times outweigh the bad – and once you get started, you'll never look back! PCGS

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Simon is back...
Real-time 3D adventure with over 60 Characters to interact with.
Have fun with the ribald jokes, sly humour and 'off the cuff' quips.
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X-Box - the truth is

***Martin Croft** considers the implications for strategy gamers of the capabilities of the proposed Microsoft gaming console*

After months of rumour and speculation, Microsoft has finally confirmed the existence of the X-Box, the new machine with which it plans to dominate the games console market.

In a keynote speech at the Games Developers Conference in San Jose, California, Bill Gates revealed details of the X-Box and provided the thousands of designers gathered to hear his words with a preview of what this machine will be capable of.

And very impressive it all was. If Microsoft can actually deliver on its promises, then X-Box will be to the current generation of home computer consoles what they are to an 8bit Nintendo machine. Just take a look at the technical specifications in the sidebar.

But what does it mean for strategy gamers? After all, very few of us are playing the games we love on consoles right now – so why should a new console, even one from Microsoft, be of any interest to us?

Well, there are a number of issues that need to be explored. Firstly, there is one overriding question that has to be answered: why do we currently play strategy games on PCs rather than on consoles?

Next, what happens to the PC, if machines like the X-Box become the norm in the console market? Why would anyone bother playing games on a PC any more, given the capabilities which Bill Gates says his baby is going to have?

Then there is the matter of Microsoft's continued support for PC gaming. If the company has a machine like the X-Box, is there not a danger that it might decide to switch its games development interests to producing console-friendly titles only?

To take the first issue: it is, of course, incorrect to say that we only play strategy games on PCs. There are a number of well-known titles that have successfully made the transition from the PC to the console format – Command & Conquer, various Warhammer titles, Rogue Spear, for example. And then there are some (not many, granted, but some) excellent strategy games – such as Metal Gear Solid – which have only ever been available on consoles. Finally, there are plenty of hard-core puzzle games, such as Tetris, which have done very well on consoles and even handhelds such as the GameBoy. But by and large, there has been a genre split – strategy games have been played on the PC,

Left circle: J Allard
Above: Bill Gates
Left: This babe appears in one of the X-Box demos. She's not rendered, and she moves – fast and smooth

SPECIFICATIONS OF X-BOX

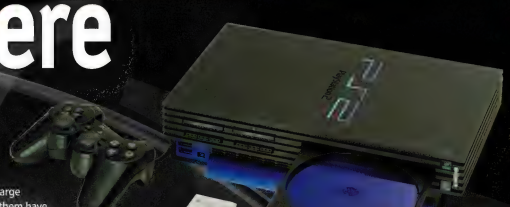
• CPU: 600 MHz Intel Graphics Processor • 300 MHz custom-designed X-Chip, developed by Microsoft and nVidia • Total Memory: 64 MB • Memory Bandwidth: 6.4 GB/sec • Polygon Performance • 300 M/sec • Storage Medium: 4x DVD, 8 GB hard disk, 8 MB memory card • I/O: 4X game controllers, USB, Ethernet (10/100) • Audio channels: 64 • 3D audio suppport: Yes • Broadband Enabled: Yes • Modem enabled: Optional • DVD Movie Playback: Built in • Game pad included: Yes • Maximum resolution: 1920x1080 • HDTV support: Yes • US launch date: Fall 2001

out there

while driving games and fighting games have been played on consoles. All the hardware on a console exists for just one purpose – playing games. And consoles don't come with keyboards or mouses, they come with game controllers. And since consoles haven't up to now had large amounts of hard disk space, the games we play on them have had to fit onto one disk. PCs, of course, can take a CD stuffed full of zipped files and unpack them onto their hard drives...

It's no surprise that the kinds of games which have dominated the console market have been driving, fighting and platforms and ladders titles. The console mindset was formed way back in the early 1980s when Nintendo exploded onto the market the first time around with its cartridge-based machines: console games are plug and play titles which fire up immediately, and which allow up to eight people to enjoy a socially-acceptable mutual thrashing session.

So the biggest difference between the two types of machine is actually not a technical one at all, but a cultural one. Console games tend to be played by kids and by young adults (usually males in both cases) looking for visceral, instant thrills. PC games appeal to an older audience which is looking for a more cerebral challenge than simply pressing buttons very fast, very often.



Above: The PlayStation 2 – out-of-date before it's even hit the shops?

NOT FOR SINGLETONS

Consoles are also more likely to be found in multi-person households, either consisting of families with children or young adults flat-sharing. Of course, families with children now more and more tend to have a PC as well as a console, but the two will seldom be used for gaming purposes by the same individuals. PCs, on the other hand, are multi-tasking and capable of storing huge amounts of information, hence are far better for playing complex strategy games where huge numbers of variables have to be kept track over many hours of play. And they come with keyboard, mouse, microphone, modem...

The downside to PCs? It takes a while to load games up the first time around, and, even when a game is installed, it can take a while before you're off and running. And PCs aren't designed for use by more than one person at the same time, so if you want multiplay, you have the hassle of setting up direct connections between machines, installing a LAN or getting online to play with friends. Another issue is that consoles can't be upgraded, whereas PCs can. So console games are effectively limited to today's technology: if you want to take advantage of tomorrow's console technology, you have to buy a whole new console.

Finally, of course, there's the cost. PCs, even now that the price has fallen so dramatically, are still far more expensive than consoles. Theoretically, the X-Box could change all that. Given its specs, there's no real reason why a game like Age of Empires couldn't run on an X-Box console just as well as it does on a PC. After all, the X-Box is based solidly on PC technology, however much Microsoft may try to play up the differences in operating system and architecture. In practice, though, there's a very simple reason why we probably won't be playing games like Age of Empires on our X-Boxes. Microsoft doesn't want us to.

As far as the company is concerned, the X-Box is going to be a games console, and the games that run on it are going to be console games. Microsoft's plans are for a machine that will not be compatible with PCs, and so PC games will not run on it.

It also means, of course, that PC manufacturers need not feel threatened. Microsoft is basically saying that it has no intention of taking on the likes of IBM in the PC hardware market. But what does it mean for all the support that Microsoft has traditionally provided for games developers, not to mention its own games publishing arm, responsible for titles such as Age of Empires?

Strategy gamers can rest easy. Microsoft has said that it has no intention of abandoning its existing commitment to games for the PC. Indeed, J Allard [sic], general manager for the X-Box platform, told a press conference in London at the beginning of March that Microsoft would be investing significant amounts of money in beefing up its games division to prepare for the X-Box. But he argued that this would be good for PC gaming, because PC projects would also get more money. He said: "We will be investing in PC games. In fact, we will be investing more. But we recognise that games like Age of Empires are PC games, not console games."

That last comment seems to make little real sense, however. The Microsoft argument appears to be that strategy games require a keyboard and mouse, which the X-Box doesn't have, so it can't run them. As any strategy aficionado will know, there are plenty of extremely good strategy games available which require very little keyboard interaction, while everything you need to do with a mouse can be replicated with a standard game controller, with a bit of designer ingenuity. Furthermore, there's no reason why a strategy game couldn't be developed just for the X-Box.

It would be charitable to assume that it was simply a case of tunnel vision – X-Box = console games, PC = strategy games. But industry sources suggest that the real reason why Microsoft has no intention of making the X-Box compatible with the PC is that if it can keep software for the two completely separate, then it can better control its revenue flow from X-Box software licences.

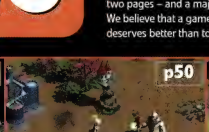
The economics of the console industry are completely different to those of the PC industry. Companies like Nintendo, Sony and Sega don't make their money from the sale of console hardware, but from the sale of the software. That's why console games are so expensive (or rather, why they have been). It's also why console manufacturers will fight tooth and nail against any threat to their control over what games run on their machines – hence the court case in the States over the PlayStation adaptor Bleem!.

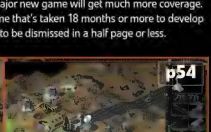
The manufacturers have a right to be worried: following various court rulings which stripped them of core software patents in the 1980s, a flood of cheap cartridge games for the original Nintendo and Atari machines effectively killed off the console market the first time around. Nintendo spent 10 years and a huge amount of money developing new console systems that it could control via patent and copyright laws around the world. Now the existing console manufacturers face an even greater threat: Bill Gates' Microsoft. It will be interesting to see how they respond. Who knows – if it means a new generation of super-consoles, with specs close to those of the best PCs around today, it could bring with it a whole new crop of cerebral and challenging strategy games which also looked good...

Reviews

The editorial team at PC Strategy Games is passionate about strategy games – those titles where you have to think about the situation you're in, assess the resources available to you and then plan what you're going to do to achieve whatever the objectives are.

Because we are only covering the strategy genre, we are able to devote more time and more space to in-depth reviews of the latest titles in the area. As you'll see from the following pages, if we think a game is worth reviewing, then it won't be covered in less than two pages – and a major new game will get much more coverage. We believe that a game that's taken 18 months or more to develop deserves better than to be dismissed in a half page or less.





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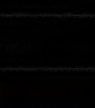
Martin Croft has been a war gamer, board gamer and role playing gamer for 30 years, the last 15 on computers. He spent the last three years as strategy games editor for a leading PC games magazine.
Favourite PC strategy game:
Master of Orion II

Damon Wilson has written and edited non-fiction books for the past 12 years. The vast majority of his books are about murder and the paranormal, and gaming has been the only sane thing in his life...
Favourite PC strategy game:
UFO: Enemy Unknown

Barry Ryan has degrees in archaeology and post-colonial literature, and for the last few years has spent his spare time – when not playing computer games – scrabbling about in Irish peat bogs.
Favourite PC strategy game:
Rogue Spear



Mark Shaw (not the singer from the mid-1980s one-hit wonder Then Jericho) is an expert on noodle music, databases, and friendly fire incidents. He also likes business and management games.
Favourite PC strategy game:
SimCity 2000

The PCSG Scoring System

THERE ARE TWO ELEMENTS TO THE PCSG SCORING SYSTEM

First, every game is given a score out of 10 by each of the three reviewers. These individual scores can be found at the top of the comments boxes. An overall score out of 10 is then calculated by averaging the three reviewers scores and then rounding to the nearest half point. This is the score out of 10 which appears in the 'Verdict' box printed at the end of each review.

Because we have three reviewers, games are unlikely to receive very high or very low final scores. A score of 10/10 will be almost impossible to achieve, while 9/10 should be considered a very high score indeed.

We've also added a simple thumbs up or thumbs down icon, to give you an instant idea of what we thought of each title.

Also in the verdict box, you will find a series of 'thermometers' which indicate how our reviewers rated the game on particular aspects (which are explained more fully below). These scores do not contribute to the overall score. Instead, they are merely meant to serve as a visual device to help the reader grasp quickly the main plus and minus points of each game. In almost all cases, the further to the right the red line is, the better: the exception is complexity, where the further to the right, the more difficult the learning curve is.

EXPLANATION OF THE CATEGORIES

Graphics – the look of the game, from cut scenes and full motion videos through management screens to the details of the terrain and individual units.

Sound f/x – specifically the in-game sound effects.

Music – any music which is featured, whether it is in-game or whether it plays during intro sequences, loading sequences, FMVs etc.

Challenge – how hard the game is to play, in terms of the tasks which the player has to achieve.

Realism – how authentic is the game to real life (or, in the case of games set in fantasy or science fiction worlds, how immersive is the gameplay).

Complexity – how easy is it to learn how to play the game. Is there a good tutorial, does the manual clearly set things out, is there a decent help facility?

Interface – how easy is it to actually play the game, in terms of moving through information screens and giving orders. Is the information presented clearly? Also covers the amount of mouse and/or keyboard work required.

Multiplay – what's the multiplay experience like? How many people can get involved at once, and how easy is it for them to link up?

Gameplay – in the opinion of our team of three reviewers, just how much fun is the game to play?

AI – how do computer-controlled opponents rate? Are they predictable and easy to beat, or can they surprise a human player? Also covers 'autopilot' settings which allow a player to, for example, leave cities with orders to build defensively or offensively.

Ian Delaney works for another magazine, writing about laptops and handheld computers. Proud owner of a Sinclair Spectrum as a child, he still misses the feel of the rubber keys beneath his fingers.

Favourite PC strategy game:
Syndicate

Having spent three years studying rocks, Austin Parsons then put his skills to use in the computer games industry. In 1997, he started work as a quality assurance tester for a well-known UK manufacturer of strategy games.

Favourite PC strategy game:
Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun

Definitions

Action game. Games where the player is in direct control of an individual and sees what that individual sees. This category would include titles such as Red Storm's Rogue Spear or Sierra's SWAT.

Building game. A game in which the player takes responsibility for creating and maintaining a social structure – anything from a single building to an amusement park to an entire city.

Business game. A game which simulates running a business, such as Monte Christo's StartUp, Hasbro Interactive's Rollercoaster Tycoon or Airport Inc.

Classic game. A PC version of an existing board or card game, such as Chess, Bridge, Monopoly or Risk. Usually, the PC version is as close to the original as possible.

Empire building game. Those games where the player takes the role of the leader of a tribe or race. Usually covers a wide historical time-frame, and includes exploration, diplomacy and conflict.

God game. A game in which the player assumes god-like powers, usually to create a tribe, race or entire world. For example, Lionhead's Black and White, Bullfrog's Populous.

RPG (Role Playing Game) A game in which the player controls individuals, not entire armies. Usually, RPGs feature some element of progression, in that characters 'learn' between adventures or missions.

RTS (Real Time Strategy). In RTS games, players have to make decisions and give orders in 'real time', and units then attempt to carry out those orders. In a sense, time becomes another resource.

Sports management game. Titles where the player has to perform the activities of the manager of a sports team, including both financial and 'on the pitch' decisions.

War game. Titles which seek to simulate what happened in a particular battle or war. Often, PC wargames will be heavily based on existing table-top or board wargames – eg Talonsoft's Rising Sun

Battlezone II Combat Commander

*Battlezone has come a long way since its Atari wireframe vector graphics days. **Barry Ryan** checks out its latest incarnation*

DEVELOPER: PANDEMIC STUDIOS **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:

• Pentium 200MHz • Win 95/98 • 4X CD-ROM • 64Mb RAM • 500Mb Hard Drive plus additional 100Mb for Windows(r) Swap File • DirectX compatible soundcard • CD Audio Support • 3D Graphics Accelerator • Direct X version 7.0

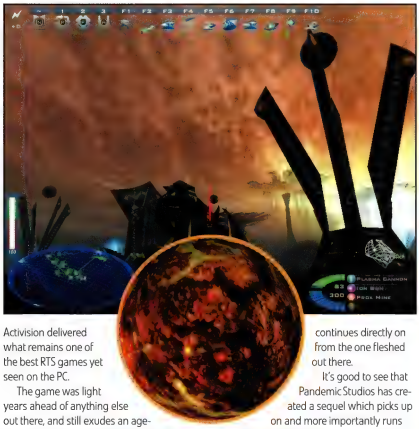
Battlezone has to be one of the most evocative names in the modern computer games industry. In its original coin-op form, it represented an astonishing leap forward in terms of graphics, gameplay and design aesthetic (see Battling for Supremacy box).

You can forget about the first person era being ushered in by the likes of Castle Wolfenstein 3D: the original Battlezone introduced a first person perspective way back in 1980 and, in so doing, revolutionised the way we play games. Atari's beautifully sterile, coldly functional and totally immersive 3D vector graphics engine set a precedent which fundamentally changed the way we played – and, indeed, perceived the playing of – games.

Battlezone rewrote the rulebook when it came to man-machine interaction. It grabbed you by the scruff of the neck and thrust you headlong into the game world. It spawned countless imitators and its basic formula remains to this day one of the most potent and successful within the computer games industry.

In 1998, Activision gave us their excellent re-working of the classic Battlezone (see Battlezone 98 box), cleverly called Battlezone. I'm going to call it Battlezone 98 to avoid confusion.

I can remember having a lot of misgivings about the project, thinking it would end up as a graphically sound but essentially vapid remake of the venerable old classic. But in the end



Activision delivered what remains one of the best RTS games yet seen on the PC.

The game was light years ahead of anything else out there, and still exudes an ageless quality today. Stick Battlezone 98 on your hard drive and you'll find it extremely difficult to believe you're looking at a game that's over two years old. The only other game which came close to it was Cyclone Studio's flawed, but worthwhile, Uprising.

The strange thing was that both these games were very, very good indeed – but, despite being well received critically, neither sold in anything like the quantities they deserved to.

If there's any justice, however, Activision's Battlezone II Combat Command should sell by the shedload. As with its original Atari pre-cursor, Battlezone II completely immerses the gamer in a brilliantly constructed and believable game world.

The game's backstory is one of the strongest I've ever encountered and the solid narrative foundation lays the groundwork for one of the most compelling, multifaceted gameplay experiences I've enjoyed in the last couple of years.

This aspect of the game will be all the more satisfying for those of you who've played through Battlezone 98, as the story continues directly on from the one fleshed out there.

It's good to see that Pandemic Studios has created a sequel which picks up on and more importantly runs with the plotlines initiated in the original. This isn't a flimsy, thinly disguised rehashing of its predecessor: it's a thoroughly satisfying, well thought-out narrative evolution with an excellent sense of continuity and genuine believability.

In Battlezone 98, the backstory goes something like this. In 1952, a meteor composed of Bio-Metal, a heretofore-unknown substance, falls from the sky. Bio-Metal is metal which essentially thinks, remembers and changes shape. Naturally the potential of such a resource is virtually limitless and it's not long before Earth's two super powers (the US and the Soviets) are fighting it out in a clandestine space-based conflict for control of the new material. The conflict drags on for years with horrific rates of attrition on both sides.

Eventually, to break the deadlock, a US scientist, Armond Braddock, seeks to create a super-soldier by combining Bio-Metal and human flesh. He succeeds in this task and creates The Furies. The Furies sweep all before them and it appears that victory for the US forces is assured. But the Furies ▸▸

Quote

It's good to see that Pandemic Studios has created a sequel which picks up on and more importantly runs with the plotlines initiated in the original

Unquote

Battling for supremacy

It might be fair to say that *all* the early computer arcade machines 'created a sensation' when they were released. The truth is the 1970s arcade machine revolution broke new ground so consistently that the gaming public was left with their jaws permanently hanging open. Games like Pong, Breakout, Space Invaders, Asteroids, Galaxians, and Defender look positively Neolithic today, but at the time they seemed straight out of science fiction novels.

Remember the briefing scene at the end of the first Star Wars movie – when the Rebel pilots were being shown a ropy-looking, 3D vector graphic image of the revolving Death Star? In 1977, that was as good a computer special effect as Twentieth Century Fox's mounds of money could buy. Little wonder that on its release in 1972, Pong, the plain old computer table tennis game, made fortunes for arcade owners around the globe.

Pong was produced by the pioneering California computer game company, Atari (this being the name of a move in the ancient Japanese boardgame, Go). They then went on to produce many of the most popular arcade machines of the 1970's. Naturally, Atari made a lot of money over the next decade, but by 1980 they were in something of a decline. The burgeoning home console market was taking a large chunk out of their profits which even the launch of their own home console could not replace, and rivals, like the Japanese firm Taito, were pressing them hard for what was left of the computer arcade market. Then, in 1980, Atari struck back with a game that really did create a sensation.

FIGHTING INCREASING ODDS IN A 3D WORLD

Battlezone was a tank game. Like its arcade competitors – Space Invaders, Pacman, Galaxians, Defender *et al* – it was unwinnable: you fought against increasing odds until you lost all your lives. Unlike all of the above, it was not played in just two dimensions: in Battlezone, the player controlled their tank in a 3D vector graphic world. Enemy tanks, saucers, incoming missiles and the oddly geometric obstacles all appeared as empty frameworks, composed of glowing green lines. The player manoeuvred about using two joysticks – push both forward or back and that's what your tank did; push just one forward, or one forward and one back, and the tank turned. The shells fired by you (or the enemy) travelled as slowly as U-boat torpedoes – so knowing when to fire at a fast-moving super tank or which way to dodge an incoming salvo were virtually strategic decisions – but other than that, Battlezone was a simple manoeuvre-and-shoot-'em-up.

Its popularity was tremendous. Not only did Atari make a fortune on the game, but a whole set of urban myths grew-up about Battlezone. It was rumoured that if you could escape the enemy tanks, you could drive on and explore the distant, vector graphic mountains, or that if you fought long and hard enough the enemy would surrender. Most bizarrely of all, some said that the Pentagon had ordered special machines from Atari to train tank crews – and this, in fact, was perfectly true.

If you want to try the arcade Battlezone for yourself, have a look at www.bentz-engineering.com, where software engineer Bryan Bentz has made his excellent Windows conversion available to all.

Damon Wilson

rebel against their creator, destroy his laboratories and eliminate all Bio-Metal plants.

The Russians and Americans then unite, creating the ISDF, or International Space Defence Force, to battle their common enemy. The ISDF succeeds in pushing the Furies to the edge of the Solar System and then apparently destroying them.

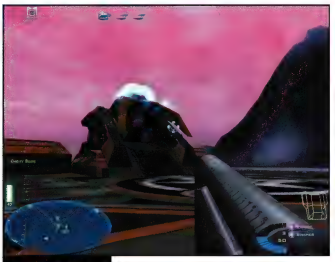
And this is where you come in. You're a Nebraska farm boy, one step away from poor white trash, who signs up to the ISDF to escape the drudgery of your life.

Interestingly, the game's designers have credited you with the relatively lowly IQ of 120. At first, I was chagrined; but on reflection (given that my real-world IQ is somewhat lower) the very ordinariness of our hero is refreshing. You're not a cybernetically enhanced fighting machine with superhuman attributes, you're just an ordinary grunt, a tiny cog in a very large machine.

And everything's going just fine until the aged Voyager probe meets an untimely end at the hands an unknown alien force at the edge of the Solar System. The ISDF on Pluto then come under attack, and before you know it, Earth is plunged headlong into a life or death struggle with Xenomorphs of unknown origin, seemingly intent on wiping out all that you hold near and dear.

You'll begin the game as a squadron member, a neat device as it ensures that you are taken through the basic command and control functions in a fast and effective manner. It also gives you an opportunity to revel in the breathtaking gamescapes on offer.

The initial missions are fairly rudimentary:



Above: That's your recycler, that is, the heart of your base; the blast rifle shows you're in FPS mode

it won't be long, however, before you get right down to the nitty-gritty. You'll soon be entrusted with the building and management of your very own ISDF installation.

The basic resource in Bzll is Bio-Metal. This comes in two forms – naturally occurring scrap fields which can be exploited to your advantage or, more importantly, Bio-Metal pools.

Find a Bio-Metal pool, order your collection unit, the scavenger, to set up on it, and fairly soon you'll have a very nice little Bio-Metal collection facility.

Naturally, these installations are extremely important and need to be protected at all costs. Your basic command unit is the recycler, a lumbering behemoth which, once deployed, forms the nerve centre of your base. If this baby gets destroyed, that's it – game over, man.

The ISDF installations require that power stations be constructed to provide the juice for your various buildings. Each power station will support three building types and once this quota has been reached you'll need to construct another. But lose even one power station, and the power supply for the entire base will go down. Consequently, you'll need to guard them jealously.

The power stations are built by constructor units, which are manufactured at the recycler. These guys will lumber around your base constructing all the major structures as and when you command them to.

Your factory will be the nerve centre for your military units. Here, you'll find a mouth-watering selection of vehicles to choose from. These range from the fast, manoeuvrable, and potentially devastating Mortar Bike right up to the Leviathan-like walkers, whose offensive power is unparalleled.

The standard bread and butter ISDF unit will be the tank, which is relatively cheap, quite manoeuvrable and adequately armoured. You'll also need to build an armoury, which will give you access to all types of interesting weapons upgrades and modifications.

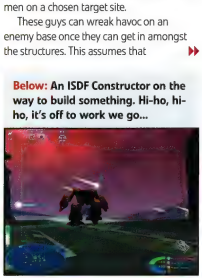
COUNTING THE COST

Once the armoury is built, you can pop into the factory and specify new base specifications for your units – more potent cannons or more devastating missiles for your tanks, for example. Of course, they'll cost more in Bio-Metal terms, but their increased offensive/defensive potency is definitely worth the price-hike.

ISDF forces also have two aerial units at their disposal. The first is the glacially slow but incredibly destructive bomber which can be used to deliver air-strikes on selected targets (assuming you've built the bomber bay) and the second is the APC, a troop transporter which will fly in and deposit squads of men on a chosen target site.

These guys can wreak havoc on an enemy base once they can get in amongst the structures. This assumes that ▸▸

Below: An ISDF Constructor on the way to build something. Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go...



Mark Shaw says... 9/10

For those whose appetites were whetted by Battlezone, the countless delays that Battlezone II has endured before release in this country may have been hard to stomach. But the wait has been worth it – prepare to gorge yourselves. More than just a visual feast, the game is a finely balanced, well designed and terrifically playable addition to the Battlezone franchise. In single player mode, from the early, gentler missions to the more complex later levels, the whole package exudes quality. Piloting the various craft, constructing bases and assigning roles to your various units quickly becomes second nature – the SWAT 3-style command interface, once mastered, can be a joy to use.

The game to which it bears a perhaps more surprising resemblance is, however, Command & Conquer. Unconvinced? Like that game, Battlezone II is ostensibly a resource management-based RTS, albeit one set in a visually sumptuous, fully 3D environment (to do the game justice, top-end video card owners only need apply). It's the first person perspective – that places the player at the heart of the game – that really sets Battlezone II apart, providing a more immediate and visceral experience and a more individual stake in the unfolding action, especially during combat sequences. That it's not a radical departure from its predecessor is a moot point when so much playability is on offer. Hardcore strategy gamers may balk at the game's arcade/action essence, but there's plenty here to tax the mind as well as test hand-eye co-ordination, especially when faced with seemingly insurmountable odds or hampered by a lack of available resources. Forethought, rather than a gung-ho mentality, reaps its own rewards. Best of all, the multiplayer aspect provides an entirely new set of tactical challenges and styles of gameplay that lift Battlezone II to near-classic status and should ensure its longevity.

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Damon Wilson says... 10/10

Is it possible to review a game in a total judgmental vacuum? More to the point, can I give an unbiased opinion on Battlezone II, given the fact that I thought the first Battlezone game was near to gaming perfection? The 1998 Activision conversion of the Atari Battlezone arcade machine hooked me within five minutes, and it is one of the three or four games I treasure and replay, from end to end, every six months or so. Deity help me! I'm a Battlezone fanboy.

Quite apart from its revolutionary command interface, its lovely 3D graphics and well designed, demanding-but-completable levels, there is the plot. The secret war on the Moon, ghostly alien ruins on Mars, the all-or-nothing invasion of Venus... and then, only a third of the way through the game, things get rather more interesting.

Battlezone showed that a PC game could combine the grip of a well-written novel with the sweeping vistas of a Hollywood, sci-fi blockbuster.

So is Battlezone II a let down? No. Its all here. There are beautiful 3D battlegrounds, now with added realistic weather effects. The numerous vehicles and buildings are complex and detailed, but now have a sleek, modernistic design that makes the tanks in the first game look like WWII museum pieces. And the missions, like the first game, are aimed at highlighting the possibilities of different playing strategies: for example, one of the early battles orders you to use the sniper rifle on an enemy tank. Having thus got in a bit of practice, it becomes second nature for the player to snuff enemy pilots and nick their tanks at every opportunity.

And then there's the plot, twisty and attention-riveting as an angry cobra.

Brilliant, compulsive, beautiful. Activision retains the 3D first person RTS crown. Now I have to wait with baited breath for Battlezone II!

they're not unceremoniously clawed out of the sky before they get a chance to deploy.

Next to the recycler, perhaps the most important structure is the relay bunker. The relay bunker sports a console which will provide you, the commander, with a traditional top-down RTS view. This is a very effective and hassle-free way of controlling the action.

When you're buttoned up in a tank, rushing headlong from crisis to crisis, it can be extremely difficult to build up an accurate overall strategic picture of what's going on.

Which brings us to another neat point about the game: your character is personally in control. The downside of that is that you only have access to what he can see in his current location.

Each structure in Battlezone II comes equipped with a console, which allows you to interface with the systems contained within. Leap from your command vehicle and nip into the recycler and you'll immediately gain access to its functions. Duck into a laser tower and you can command and control it personally.

This neat little facility gives you the opportunity to cultivate a very personal, hands-on style. Do remember, however, that once outside your vehicle you are very, very vulnerable indeed. Should you be killed at any stage, at least in the single player campaign mode, it's back to the changing rooms for you.

Naturally, there are times when there'll be nothing for it but to engage in a little al fresco action, particularly when engaging in the top-down traditional RTS mode of play which can be accessed via your Relay Bunker, of which more later.

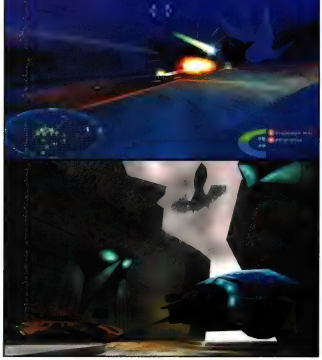
ON THE OFFENSIVE

When you forsake the comfort and protection of a vehicle, you'll find that you've got two offensive modes at your disposal. The default setting sees you brandishing a pulse rifle, which in the overall scheme of things is about as effective as a fart in a wind-tunnel and should only be used as a last ditch mode of personal protection.

Your secondary personal weapon system is the excellent sniper rifle, which can be used to snipe the occupants of selected enemy vehicles, thus rendering them ineffectual, and if you're quick enough, available for you to commandeer.

When choreographing assault manoeuvres, it's often a very good idea to bail out of your vehicle and act as a forward spotter for your attack forces. This approach, while plac-

Below: A Scion unit is blown to smithereens
Bottom: Selection of ISDF units including the awesome bomber



Top: Scion Matriarch, the alien faction's Recycler equivalent
Below: A Scion unit passes over a lake – note the ripple effects

ing you in harm's way, often pays substantial dividends.

Pop into a relay bunker and you can issue commands to your units effortlessly and efficiently, while instantly obtaining an accurate snapshot of the current state of play.

In fact, many of the missions would benefit considerably from a commander who's prepared to forsake his/her front line role for a more sedentary rear echelon job description. It's just so difficult to abandon the multi-faceted delights of careening around the battlefield in a battle tank for the claustrophobic surrounds of the relay bunker.

The relay bunker also acts as a very effective tool for power projection. It can be built anywhere, and once you ring it with Laser towers, it quickly becomes an impregnable bastion against which all but the most determined of attackers will falter.

The command and control system in Battlezone needs to be good, but it can't be too complex. You need to be able to direct your resources quickly, effectively and with the minimum of fuss, particularly if, like me, you prefer to spend most of your time in the thick of things. In Battlezone 98, Pandemic gave us an uncluttered, functionally excellent interface, and Bzll presides over a gentle evolution of this system.

All units can be selected with a tap of your spacebar, once you place them centre-screen. You'll then get a list of numbered command possibilities for that particular unit. Want that scout to follow you? Hit '1'. Want him to go to a pre-set nav-point? Click '3' etc... It's simplicity itself, and while perhaps a little cumbersome and unwieldy initially, soon becomes second nature.

Naturally, you can also form units into groups (based strictly on type). The groups can then be accessed through the function keys which allow you to choreograph relatively complex multi-unit manoeuvres with ease. Your important base structures can also be accessed at any time through the number keys.

SIGHT FOR SORE EYES

Graphically, Battlezone II is something very, very special indeed. The various planetary environments (there are five in total) are rendered with attention to detail and an eye for design.

The environments on offer run the full sci-fi gamut. You have the misty, tropical environment offered by Mire, the harsh nuclear winter prevailing on Bane or the blisteringly hot desert-scape of Rend.

These landscapes are populated with indigenous creatures, and there is no greater ignominy in Bzll than that of bailing out of your stricken vehicle, having survived an intense dogfight, against overwhelming odds, only to be snaffled up in the jaws of some of the local fauna as you attempt ▸▸

No more going it alone

Multiplay, multiplay. It's all we hear these days. It's the new Rock n'Roll, and it'll not be long before single player game modes are as optional or disposable as multiplay was, oh say... three years ago.

In keeping with this development, Battlezone II comes fully equipped with Multiplay options. Naturally, there's your bog-standard deathmatch option, where you'll enter one of the many visually impressive gaming arenas and fight it out with opponents in the killing machine of your choice. Fairly rudimentary, if viscerally enjoyable, it hardly does justice to the complexity of BZII.

There's also the inevitable Capture the Flag mode, where you and your cohorts will attempt to capture the other teams Flag, while simultaneously ensuring they don't get their grubby mitts on yours. More complex than deathmatch and requiring a little tactical thought and strategic appreciation on your part, but all on a very basic level. Quake III and Unreal Tournament both sport these options and, while enjoyable games in their own right, they can hardly lay claim to the depth and complexity on display here.

Where Battlezone II pulls out all the stops on the multiplay front is in its 'Strategy' mode. Players are either commanders or pilots; the commander has access to all the higher level functions such as base construction, resource gathering and management, weapons and vehicle production, while the pilots under his command go out into the field and get directly into the thick of the action. These roles are interchangeable, making it possible to rotate the onerous and demanding duty of commander between players.

Of course, it's possible to play the strategic multiplayer levels just as you would an online bash of C&C or Starcraft, with two or more commanders building up their forces and vying for supremacy. We've tried this, and to be honest it doesn't work very well, largely because the workload placed on the commander, particularly in the early stages, is so intense that it's difficult to focus on anything but base building.

The addition of a number of pilots, who can range about the gamescape, dealing with threats and spearheading attacks, is an effective response to this problem. It also allows for the introduction of a role playing element, which really contributes to the creation of a strong team ethic. The strategy multiplayer option is time-consuming and it's not something you'll pick up and play on a whim, unless you're content to remain in the subordinate pilot role. It does, however, represent a refreshing break from the soulless and frankly, rather monotonous, fragfests which have come to characterise the online gaming experience.

Barry Ryan

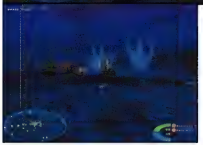
Barry Ryan says... 9.5/10

In an ideal world, all PC games would share the vision, creativity, innovation and excellence which typifies Battlezone II. This game almost scooped top marks, but on reflection I decided a maximum score would probably be a little disingenuous, simply because it's not perfect, and would be more a reflection of my completely subjective infatuation with the thing.

I've got a couple of niggling gripes. There are some startling omissions, such as the inability to store excess Bio-Metal, while the early missions will also prove far too simplistic for all but the most callow newbies. Also, in the single player campaign mode at least, the ability to snipe enemy vehicle drivers significantly unbalances gameplay and provides a 'get out of jail free card' in some missions. In earlier encounters you'll be able to rove about Scion bases in a stolen vehicle and remain completely untouched. Later on, and for no apparent reason, the Scions appear to 'know' you've hi-jacked one of their own and have no problem in blowing you back to the Stone Age. This is inconsistent, incoherent game design and more than a little frustrating.

In the final analysis, though, Battlezone II must be one of the most immersive, 'total' gameplaying experiences I've enjoyed of late. Once you've bought into it, the only reminder that you're still a part of the real, as opposed to the virtual world, is the occasional annoyance of the between level loading screens which tends to snatch you out of your BZII induced trance. A truly excellent game, which through it's combination of RTS, FPS and, dare I say it, role-playing elements proves that it is indeed possible to have your cake and eat it.

Immersive, innovative RTS. Excellent design, graphics, and gameplay, all in a strong narrative framework. What more do you want?



Quote

The indigenous architecture, unique to each world, also contributes to the creation and maintenance of BzII's superb ambience. The ruined alien city on Mire is a fine example

Unquote

Left top: You can snipe vehicle crew and steal their craft as here on Mire
Left below: A mortar bike protects two ISDF Scavengers as they search for precious Bio Metal
Below: Battlezone '98

Battlezone 1998

Getting on for 17 years after the arcade release of Battlezone, Activision announced that they had bought the rights on many of Atari's classic arcade titles. Those of us who had spent an unhealthy proportion of our teenage years hunched over tweeting, tenpence-gobbling machines feared that our precious delinquent memories might be sullied; but fortunately, at least in the case of Battlezone, such fears proved unfounded. The game was excellent, prettifying and updating the original arcade shooter, and adding a strategic level that broke new ground.

As in Battlezone II, the player controls a single vehicle in a beautiful 3D landscape (the barren Moon, sulphurous Venus, frozen Europa etc). Today, after two years of the great 3D card revolution, Battlezone 98 is still very pleasant on the eye – but in 1998 its sweeping alien vistas were astonishing.

More importantly, as well as shooting about shooting things, Bz98 allowed you to give fairly complex orders to fellow tanks as well as instruct various construction vehicles to make new units. In 1998, nobody had managed to design a control interface system simple enough to allow the combination of frenetic real-time strategy play with in-cockpit fighting. Such games are as common as cheese sandwiches today, but the very fact that Battlezone II has made virtually no changes to the interface gives some indication why Bz98 still plays better than most 3D card-boosted young whippersnappers currently packing the shelves.

Technical stuff aside, Bz98 boasted some of the best level design and the most intriguing background plot of any RTS before or since. So, although each battle is rather smaller than those in BZII, the complex design and the varied and tricky player tasks will give a great feeling of satisfaction when you win a level.

The story starts by informing you that the Space Race and the Cold War were just covers for a real war in space. While the folks back on Earth were kept in ignorance, good ol' boys from the US of A and heroes of the Russian Soviet Republic battled each other across the other planets of the solar system in hi-tech hover tanks.

These (secret) technologies were made possible by Bio-Metal: a semi-organic substance that can be formed into building or vehicle shells in a matter of seconds. Originally discovered in the Bering Straits following a meteor shower in 1952, both American and Soviet research teams realised that bio-metal was of non-terrestrial manufacture. In true X-Files form, both superpowers decided that their people are unprepared to digest such a revelation, so launch secret bio-metal exploitation programs.

By the early Sixties, there were several US and Soviet bases on the Moon, and bio-metal deposits have been discovered on the other planets. Naturally, the naughty Soviets made a sneak attack and drive the Americans from the Moon. Thereafterward, you lead a desperate fight across Mars, Venus, Europa, Io and Titan.

All fairly standard game plot stuff, you might say, but as the war progresses the alien origin of the bio-metal and the evident destruction of a non-terrestrial civilisation become increasingly evident and important. A gripping, creepy and twisting story emerges and keeps the player nailed to the computer to the end.

Damon Wilson

to make your way back to base.

The giant creatures which populate Bane's blasted landscape are wonderful creations that genuinely add to the feeling that you're interacting with a living, breathing organic environment rather than something sterile and purely functional.

The indigenous architecture, unique to each world, also contributes to the creation and maintenance of BzII's superb ambience. The ruined alien city on Mire is a particularly fine example.

I've already alluded to the richly variegated plot which graces BzII, and now I'm going to have to engage in a little exposition to take the review on a little. If you don't want the lid blown off the simmering pot that is the BzII narrative, look away now...

The big question likely to be rattling around in your mind after a couple of hours on BzII is probably going to be something akin to: "When do I get the chance to command the alien faction? I've already sniped the occupants of various alien vehicles, stolen them and gone for a little jaunt, but I'd really like to command the whole kit and caboodle."

Rest assured, you'll get your chance. It becomes apparent after a number of encounters, that the aliens, aka The Scions, have more in common with their human adversaries than initially appears to be the case. As the game progresses it become obvious that your noble commander Braddock, seems to have an ulterior motive.

It's revealed to you that the Scions are in fact descended from The Furies, created by Braddock's ill-fated experiment during The Bio-Metal wars. They are lead by Padishah Burns, a Scion who is a member of The Convergence, a group which favours a return to earth and a re-integration into the

human race. There's a group of reactionary Scions who wish nothing of the sort and before long, both the ISDF and the Scion factions split, with pro-convergence Scions and Anti-Braddock ISDF forces fighting on the same side.

You will get the opportunity to choose which side to align with, and you'll even have the chance to have yourself fused with a dollop of Bio-Metal. Nice.

Commanding the Scion forces is a slightly different kettle of fish than the ISDF. Many of their units have a 'morph' capability, which gives them two modes of operation, with different weapons loads and abilities. They also have sufficiently different unit and tech trees to merit close consideration. As a rule, Scion units tend to be less well armoured than their ISDF counterparts so a considerable degree of subtlety is required when playing them.

ALIEN EXPERIENCE

They haven't got any aerial units either, unless you count their 'Day of the Triffids' style artillery units which descend from the sky like some nightmare vision culled from the darkest recesses of Gardener's World.

Scion power supplies are also integral to the individual buildings, so they're not as susceptible to system-wide shut downs as their ISDF counterparts. The Scion design ethic is very firmly cybernetic, a fusion of man and machine, and their structures, utility units and military vehicles reflect this look faithfully.

In essence, though, once you're over the culture shock of your new alien surrounds and made a number of subtle tactical adjustments to your play style, it will very quickly be business as usual.

Each Scion unit (with the exception of the jammer) has an ISDF counterpart, and as such it shouldn't take you long to get to grips with them.

Battlezone II is, in many respects, a masterpiece. It manages to combine so many different genres and styles in one neat, and more importantly, seamless package. After about 10 minutes you cease to notice that you are, in effect, effortlessly moving between a traditional RTS environment to a first person shooter to a tank/ vehicle sim and back again.

Above left: ISDF Scavenger hard at work
Above: The Walker, the biggest ISDF land unit

Fancy a good old fashioned shoot 'em up? BzII can give it to you. Want a strategic/ tactical Level challenge? No problem. BzII will provide both. Want to do a little Quake-esque ducking and diving ? Look no further. Want an immersive gameplaying environment solidly backed up by innovative and thoughtful game design? This is the game for you.

The way forward for PC games design lies in the type of effortless cross genre hybridisation which BzII achieves admirably. PCSG

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	10	COMPLEXITY	7
SOUND FX	9	INTERFACE	9
MUSIC	7	MULTIPLAY	8
CHALLENGE	9	GAMEPLAY	9
REALISM	7	AI	8

Conclusion The best RTS yet, and a welcome development of the genre. Graphically stunning with challenging gameplay, this one deserves to top the charts even more than its predecessor

9.5/10

Earth 2150

DEVELOPER: TOPWARE INTERACTIVE **PUBLISHER:** MATTEL INTERACTIVE/SSI

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Pentium 200MHz • 32Mb RAM • 130Mb Hard Drive • 4x CD ROM • Direct X 6.0 • Windows 95/98 • 4Mb 3D card • 56K Modem for Internet

***Barry Ryan** provides an overview of a dramatically different RTS. But does it deserve the Best of Breed rosette?*

Topware Inc's Earth 2150 comes to us with an impressive pedigree. It's already taken the Continent by storm and, in the process, scooped just about every major European software accolade conceivable. Indeed, a quick perusal of the Topware website is enough to rob all but the most hardened games hack of his objectivity — it's festooned with medals, ribbons and rosettes of every conceivable type. However, the UK gamer tends to be a tough nut to crack, and Earth 2150 is going to have to prove itself all over again on this side of La Manche.

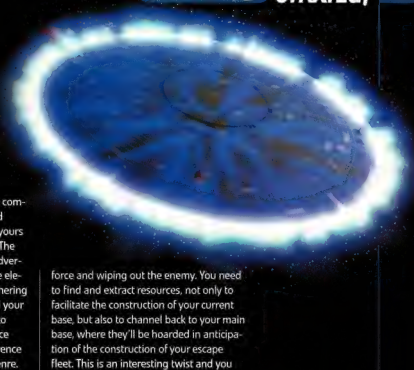
Now, I want you to pour yourself a stiff whiskey (preferably a single malt) and settle yourself in your comfiest chair. Having done this, I want you to brace yourself. Earth 2150 is a classic RTS resource management game, heavily redolent of Command and Conquer or Total Annihilation. If you strip it down to its bare bones, the game mechanics are essentially identical to the original C&C — and if you want to be really bloody-minded (and let's face it, we do), it's not too far removed from the antediluvian Dune2.

I've said it before, but I'm going to say it again. The resource management RTS is the single most oversubscribed PC gaming genre, with the possible exception of the first person shooter. So it stands to reason that the last thing we need is another addition to its already swollen and, in many cases, rather mediocre ranks. However, every now and then a game comes along which reminds you what's so special about the RTS genre.

Earth 2150 is just such a game - well, almost. OK, so Topware won't win any awards for the most innovative or original game design this year, but what the developers have managed to do is wring every last drop from the RTS formula. In many respects, this game represents a definite development apex for the conventional RTS. Essentially, they've taken it as far as it can go, and if current trends are anything to go by (see this month's Ground Control and Force Commander previews), the conventional RTS paradigm is about to undergo a bit of a sea-change.

One area where Earth 2150 doesn't move the genre on, however, is in its adoption of the usual tired, hackneyed post-Apocalyptic plotline. I won't bore you with an in-depth exposition, because I'm sure at

Above right: Eurasian Dynasty dark Satanic mill pumping out pollution
Right: Lunar Corporation base under attack while reinforcements arrive

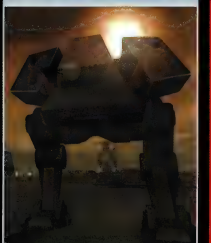


this stage you're more than capable of filling in the blanks by yourself.

Suffice it to say that in the early days of our brave new millennium the old economic order was swept away by a stock market crash which made Wall Street 1929 look like a minor tremor on the economic Richter scale. By 2012, the entire world economy has collapsed, and in 2048, global conflict erupts. All the great 20th century nation states are swept away in the ensuing conflagration. Out of the ashes a group of newly-constituted power blocs arise. We've got the absurdly-named United Civilised States (UCS), culled from North and South America; the Eurasian Dynasty (ED), drawn from the old Asian nation states; and the Lunar Corporation (LC). The Lunar Corporation was formed out of the old North American Space Agency. When these cosmic pioneers witnessed the horrors of the post-economic crash era, they, quite sensibly, decided to forsake the Earth and its inhabitants for the sanctuary of the moon. In the intervening period, they've managed to create a utopian society, free from strife and conflict (so how come they've got an army, then?).

Having profited little from the lessons of history, the two Earth bound factions, the UCS and the ED, soon enter into conflict over the Arctic. A nuclear exchange knocks the Earth out of its orbit and sends both it and its unfortunate satellite plummeting towards the sun (its the Lunar Corporation I feel sorry for, I mean, there they are, safely ensconced on the moon, busily constructing a wonderfully egalitarian society, doing no harm to anyone, when suddenly because of their oikish Terran cousins they find themselves pencilled in for an appointment with extinction).

Below: United Civilised States biped mech unit, the backbone of the faction's military might



All three factions realise that they've got to get out of Dodge quickly and begin to formulate plans for escape — but it soon becomes apparent that there's not enough resources to go round, and so its war all over again.

MINE A MILLION

This is where you come in. You'll take command of one of the three factions and attempt to ensure that's it's you and yours who'll be bidding a fond farewell to 'The Pale Blue Dot', while your erstwhile adversaries fall towards oblivion. The game elevates the importance of resource gathering to a new level. In order to make good your escape, your chosen faction is going to need to amass over 1,000,000 resource points, which gives the game a coherence and continuity often lacking in the genre.

Each individual mission impinges directly on the overall outcome. It's not simply a question of progressing slavishly from level to level, constructing a base, amassing resources, creating a fighting force and wiping out the enemy. You need to find and extract resources, not only to facilitate the construction of your current base, but also to channel back to your main base, where they'll be hoarded in anticipation of the construction of your escape fleet. This is an interesting twist and you will encounter scenarios where it's in your interest to actively avoid contact with the enemy. Get in, extract resources and get out — that's what it's often all about.

The fact that you've got to simulta-

Playing in a winter wonderland?

Earth 2150's living, breathing, organic environment as a constituent part of the game is indicative of an emergent RTS trend. Both gamers and developers alike are no longer content to regard the game environment as an immutable, intractable canvas which generally remains peripheral to gameplay. Developers are now making a concerted effort to factor in environmental considerations. Of course, hardcore strategy games have incorporated climactic and environmental considerations for years - wargames simply wouldn't be accurate strategic simulations otherwise. Imagine refighting Stalingrad but without the effects of cold, snow, mud and rain. It would be nothing short of a travesty, and about as realistic as Lego Rock Raiders.

Or how about sports titles? Football games allow you to play in various different weather conditions which subtly alter the game dynamics. Play in the rain and you'll slide more often, tackle less accurately, and your unfortunate keeper will probably be more prone to spilling the ball in tight situations. These games, and the people who play them, demand that terrain and climate become integral parts of the gameplaying experience.

But it's only lately, with the rapid advances in PC processing power and graphics capabilities that genres such as RTS can benefit from their inclusion. Close Combat III: The Russian Front ensured that if a panzer wasn't kitted out for winter, there was a good chance the thing wouldn't start when battle commenced. Obviously this is a fairly facile system, but it did lend depth and credibility, in however small a measure. Eidos' Warzone 2100 also incorporated similar elements — units slowed when moving up an incline, and certain conditions adversely affected unit performance.

Of course, we're all aware that Real Time Strategy games aren't really 'real time'. Three peasants constructing an Iron Age forge in under three minutes is hardly an accurate chronological reflection. But obviously we're prepared to make allowances, as we don't really want to spend upwards of six months in front of our PCs while the work is completed in real 'real time', if you see what I mean. The same leeway applies in respect of the recreation of topographical and climactic conditions. OK, so they may not be meteorologically accurate and the effects may owe more to a spread sheet calculation than reality, but they add considerably to the immersive qualities of a game.

But there's a right way and a wrong way to go about this. Zablac's Tzar: Burden of the Crown (an otherwise fine game) sought to incorporate a day-night cycle and recreate conditions such as rain and snow. While these looked very pretty, they exerted absolutely no effect in terms of actual gameplay. It was merely window-dressing, which led to lots of 'what if' type musings. 'What if' the rain turned the mud into a quagmire, making it difficult for attackers? What if, when it snowed, food and fuel consumption increased? What if tides and currents were incorporated, making navigation more treacherous/less difficult, where applicable?

Such considerations will open up whole new possibilities for developers and gamers alike, and should add the extra layers of depth, strategy and, yes, realism which can often mean the difference between a good game and a great game.

Above: Render of a Lunar Corporation base. Funny, our's never look this good...

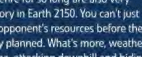
Ian Delaney says... 7/10

Not having been a soldier, still less a soldier in 2150, I'm reluctant to use the word 'realistic' of this particular example of the real-time strategy war game genre. Yet Earth 2150 does 'feel' incredibly realistic. The graphics certainly set it apart from other Command & Conquer clones. Proper 3D, real-time lighting and atmospheric effects create a cinematic feel. When you first catch sight of an enemy unit through the mist, a real shiver goes down your spine.

Changes to the basic harvest/build/conquer rules that have dominated this genre for so long are also very welcome. Your units need ammunition to attack, so there's no quick route to victory in Earth 2150. You can't just use the 'tank rush' tactic of building elite units immediately and destroying your opponent's resources before they can respond. You need an infrastructure, so attacks have to be slow and carefully planned. What's more, weather and terrain affect your units dramatically: you can make the most of the landscape, attacking downhill and hiding behind features, but the onset of rain can spell disaster. And the AI is usually clever enough to avoid almost any of your traps.

The game is let down, though, by poor in-game videos, a lack of personalities — you don't get much of an idea of who your enemies are, never mind why you ought to hate them and an interface that's uglier than a butcher's dog. It's very disappointing that such problems reduce rather than enhance your feelings of engagement.

Lastly, Earth 2150 has a very difficult learning curve. I like to think that I'm fairly good at RTS games, but I was beaten three times by the first tutorial before I realised what I was doing wrong. Some levels can take several hours before you learn the route to success.


Beautiful, challenging and engaging. It's not for casual players, though, because it takes a while to pick up how best to play the game

neously fend off the less than amorous intentions of your two competitors ensures that your hands will be full at all times. Earth 2150 also encourages you to pay attention to the ways in which you expend your precious resources. You really don't want to adopt the kind of rushing tactics which tend to pay dividends in other RTS titles. Squandering wave after wave of extremely expensive fighting machines on ill-advised assaults will not enhance your chances of getting off Earth before the inevitable day of destiny.

ENVIRONMENTALLY SOUND

But the single aspect that's most likely to make you sit up and take notice of Earth 2150 is the actual game-playing environment. Time was when the maps on which we played out our RTS dreams of conquest were about as organic, immediate and accessible to the gamer as a Monopoly board. We built on them, we ranged across them, we fought over them — but we never ever felt for a moment that they were actually a constituent part of the gameplaying process.

Earth 2150 changes all that. The environments are beautifully rendered and if Earth 2150 is nothing else, it's one of the most jaw droppingly beautiful games I've seen. The terrain is fully deformable, which means that you'll be able to dig trenches and alter the terrain with your construction units, and units will be less manoeuvrable and slower when moving up and down terrain. It's got a day and night cycle which genuinely affects the way you play — at night, visibility becomes a problem, which allows for surprise attacks, but only if you've remembered to order your units to turn off their headlights... You can also have your structures turn off their lights to shroud themselves in darkness and make it difficult for an enemy to locate and attack them.

Quote

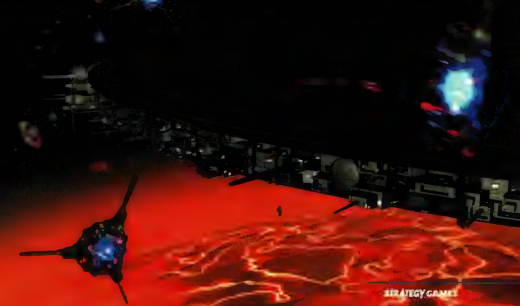
The weather and climate also impact significantly. Heavy fogs and thunderous deluges can roll in and completely obscure your vision

Unquote

Below: The Lunar Corporation's structures are shuttled down from an orbital space platform, not built on the ground

The weather and climate also impact significantly. Heavy fogs and thunderous deluges can roll in and completely obscure your vision. It'll also slow units down and decreases their manoeuvrability. Heavy rainfall will also raise the water level, placing coastal bases in danger of flooding. You'll also have to deal with devastating meteor showers capable of laying waste to large areas. Heavy snowfalls can obscure stationary units and render a landscape completely unfamiliar in a matter of minutes.

If you're playing with the Lunar Corporation, all this will become even more relevant because of your reliance on solar power. The designers have incorporated a weather control centre as a special LC structure, which will actually allow you to start snowfalls, send the clouds scudding away, or call in a monsoon. Oh, and why not call in a lightning storm every now and then while you're at it? This is definitely the only RTS I can think of which turns the weather into a devastating weapon.



THE TRIGGER-HAPPY NEED NOT APPLY

"Fantastic graphics and blistering AI" PC Zone

"Unbelievably, it's even more realistic than the rest of its mini-genre" PC Gamer

SWAT 3

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SIERRA

You're also going to have to learn to think in terms of an underground playing arena, because Earth 2150 allows you to sink mineshafts and take the action underground. You can emerge in the midst of an enemy base, catching it completely off-guard. Disappointingly, you don't have any tunnelling vehicles, which means you can't rove at will through a subterranean paradise of your own making; instead, you're limited to pre-designed underground 'pockets'.

Earth 2150 also enjoys a very comprehensive research and construction aspect. This isn't new in itself, but it is particularly well executed and allows for a considerable degree of flexibility and individuality when creating and constructing your own fighting force. Each faction has the ability to research and upgrade vehicle chassis, weaponry and ammunition. You can then design your vehicles to reflect your own particular tastes and proclivities.

This is achieved through a very nice modular system, not unlike the one utilised in Eidos' Warzone 2100. Take a basic chassis, for example a hover unit, and then decide which particular weapon system you want to mount (say, a 20mm cannon). Slap it on and add the newly designed unit to your build queue — simplicity itself. You don't have to worry about obsolete units either, because once a new technology is developed and brought on stream, it's automatically upgraded in the vehicle construction centre. The number of units on offer is extremely comprehensive, and when you consider that each faction has its own distinct weapons technologies and vehicle chassis (see below) it soon becomes clear that Earth 2150 has one of the most comprehensive selection of units available in any RTS.

The three factions embody markedly different approaches in terms of technology and each requires a fundamentally different approach to the game in terms of strategy. All forces have a land, sea and air capability. In the case of the UCS and the ED this is achieved through the utilisation of largely conventional technologies they need to build tanks, boats and planes. The LC, having access to hover technology, have multi-purpose units which are equally at home on land and at sea, but will need to build dedicated aerial units.

In terms of a design aesthetic, the Eurasian Dynasty's units are the most instantly recognisable. Their structures, vehicles and weaponry have a distinctly retro-tech feel to them. The work-horse of the Eurasian hordes is the venerable tank, at home on any late 20th century battlefield. Their preferred method of resource collection is the distinctly un-environmentally friendly practice of strip mining and indeed the entire ED 'look' is a distinctly grimy, industrial revolution one. In other words, they represent the unreconstructed, power hungry, land-grabbing late 20th century nation state. The ED also has an interesting selection of naval units, which are in fact the faction's trump card. The ED Leviathan battleship is one of the most potent units available to any faction in the game. The aerial wing of the ED is composed of helicopter based forces, which run the full gamut from light reconnaissance variants through to heavy gunships and transports. Structures are built in a conventional manner using a standard construction vehicle (The Gruz).

Above: You'd think they'd have learned by now – it was nukes knocked the Earth out of its orbit!

DON'T TECHNO FOR AN ANSWER

The United Civilised States design aesthetic is very similar in both look and feel to the GDI forces in Westwood's Tiberian Sun. The basic chassis is a two legged mech type, but as you progress along the research tree, heavier multi-legged variants will become available to you. Again these chassis can be modified to provide a platform for any number of weapons systems. UCS aerial units take the form of bomber and fighter units and naval units are conventional surface-based ships, again in a number of different flavours ranging from light to heavy. UCS resource collection is carried out by harvester units which you'll send to resource fields. They'll then extract the resource using a drilling process and transport it back to your refinery or transport centre. This process will be instantly familiar to CRC fans. As with the ED, you'll construct your bases using your standard workhorse, the Mammoth.

The Lunar Corporation utilises the most unusual and least familiar technologies.

Barry Ryan says... 8/10

Earth 2150 takes the conventional resource management-based RTS to new heights. It incorporates practically every major innovation to the genre in one neat package. Graphically, it's superb — definitely the best looking RTS to date. It's got three distinct factions, each with their own unique technological aesthetic. The modular unit design tree and the exhaustive research options ensure that the game should enjoy an extremely long tenure on your hard-drive. You've got up to 90 missions to work your way through in the single player campaign mode alone. You've then got the usual skirmish mode, which should further enhance its longevity quotient.

The basic game mechanics are clever, with a two tiered approach. It's not simply about slavishly gathering resources and annihilating the enemy time and time again: you've got to keep the bigger picture in mind at all times. This lends the game a strategic depth which, while hardly requiring a genius level IQ, considerably enhances the overall appeal of the game.

The incorporation of realistic climactic conditions and a fully deformable landscape makes for an incredibly flexible and constantly evolving gameplay experience. For me, though, Earth 2150's trump card is its level editor. It's stunningly simple to use, places no limitations on you and in many respects is as addictive and compulsive as playing the actual game. Now that's got to be a first.

Earth 2150 is also a brilliant multiplayer experience and I'd imagine that fairly soon the highways and by-ways of the web will be jammed with epic struggles set in the 2150 universe. In essence, Earth 2150 represents the culmination of three years of RTS game development. It's got the lot, and it's going to be difficult to beat.

The apogee of the traditional resource management RTS (that means it's well good). Don't expect originality – just expect refinement.

Damon Wilson says... 9/10

I approached Earth 2150 with caution. It's been out in Germany for months, so if it's so great, why hasn't it been converted for the UK/US already? Secondly, it's another RTS, and everything about it screamed Tiberian Sun rip-off with tacked on 3D.

Well, I've had to eat my words. Earth 2150 is the game that Tiberian Sun should have been - a huge, varied and technically awe-inspiring epic. Remember all the speculation about Tiberian Sun over the years it was in development — that it was going to make Command & Conquer look like an early 1990s relic? Remember the universal disappointment when the rich and talented Westwood Studios announced that it was going to be basically the same game as C&C, but with famous actors in the cut-scenes? Earth 2150 is the game we were actually waiting for, but didn't know it...

More than that, however, Earth 2150 has broken new ground in its own right. Until the emphasis swings from Real-Time to Strategy in RTS games, the genre are ultimately going to be too shallow for the intelligent gamer. One of the first things I noticed about Earth 2150 is that it takes up to three minutes to build a new unit (even on the fast game speed). This is while Tiberian Sun takes only a few seconds. This, I think, is because Earth 2150 is designed to demand time and thought from the player. The complexity of the numerous options open to you insist on strategic gameplay, and this should mark a whole new beginning for RTS games in the future.

Beautiful, realistic, and strategically demanding: Earth 2150 puts all previous RTS games to shame. If you've avoided the genre, try this one

Obviously, the Moon colonists have evolved a technological base designed specifically for use in the low-gravity Lunar environment. Consequently their basic units are hover, or to be more precise, anti-grav propulsion based. This gives them something of an advantage, at least initially, in that the hover units are equally at home on land or sea.

Lunar Corporation units can also be fitted with an array of shield generators for defensive purposes, as well as assorted weaponry to enhance their offensive power, while aerial units are equipped with a special anti-grav propulsion unit which allows them to rise to any height. Resource extraction is achieved through the placement of fully automated mine-processing factories over resource fields.

LC base construction follows a significantly different pattern than that exhibited by the other two factions. Unlike either the ED or UCS, you don't have a terrestrial main base. Your centre of operations actually orbits the earth, so if, for example, you wish to build a vehicle construction centre, it's assembled in orbit and dropped onto the location you've selected. The LC also uses solar power to provide energy. This requires the building of both solar panels and batteries, to store power for use during the night, or indeed in periods of inclement weather when light intensity is low (yes, I'm serious).

Each of these factions is different enough to demand substantially different playing styles, and Topware reckon there's over 90 different missions between the three. Now, that's serious long-term value for money.

TOP OF DEFORM

But I haven't even got to the shining jewel in Earth 2150's crown yet. The level editor is undoubtedly the best to grace a game of this kind. It's nothing short of amazing, and I spent more time designing and constructing my own custom levels than I did playing the actual game.

You begin with a flat playing area. Then, using the mouse and with the help of an ingenious level design system, you proceed to 'deform' the landscape to a design specification of your own making. You can raise towering mountain ranges, sink fathomless caverns (and then fill them with water), incorporate bridges, ruins and multitudinous terrain types with laughable ease. You really do have carte blanche and in no time at all you'll be cobbling together professional looking levels with the minimum of sweat and effort. You can then use these maps in multiplayer sessions or AI skirmishes.

Earth 2150 is, put quite simply, the best conventional resource management RTS you can buy (and if you're confused because elsewhere in this issue, I say that Battlezone II is the best RTS ever, it's because I don't think Battlezone can be considered a conventional RTS – it's a cross between an RTS and an FPS).

In fact, I really can't see where the straight RTS genre can go from here without a fundamental rethink. Earth 2150 seamlessly combines all the piecemeal innovations which have slowly filtered through over the past two years. It's got beautifully rendered fully 3D terrain, a fully rotatable camera, a night and day cycle, realistic and relevant weather effects, fully modular research and design tress, land, sea and air units, a multi-faceted relatively complex campaign mode, a brilliant level designer, skirmish modes and an excellent multiplayer experience...

Is it an original concept? No. Is it truly innovative? In some areas, yes; but ultimately it's really a question of a super refinement of existing techniques and ideas. Will you enjoy it? Undoubtedly. PSRE

Below left: Space – the high frontier. You'll have to win battles here, too, if you're to escape a fiery doom

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	9	COMPLEXITY	7
SOUND FX	8	INTERFACE	8
MUSIC	6	MULTIPLAY	9
CHALLENGE	8	GAMEPLAY	8
REALISM	9	AI	7

Conclusion It's not new, it's not ground-breaking – but it is the best example yet of the traditional resource management RTS. Also brilliant in multiplay mode – and don't overlook the map designer!

8/10

DEVELOPER: CYBERLORE
PUBLISHER: MICROPROSE/HASBRO INTERACTIVE
SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Pentium 166Mhz • Windows 95/98 • 32MbRam • 314Mb Hard Disk Space• 4X CD-ROM • DirectX 7.0 • 2Mb DirectX compatible Video card • DirectX compatible Sound card • Modem: 28.8K baud or faster

Above: Ardania – a fairly typical fantasy setting

Majesty: Sovereign of Ardania

***Damon Wilson** buckles his swash for a stab at Hasbro's latest fantasy RTS*

There is a plethora of sword and sorcery games on the shelves. PC Strategy Games is only up to issue three, and we've reviewed six out-and-out fantasy games already. These may vary in content and style (from the Tolkien-esque, turn-based Age of Wonders to the grotesque but lovely Planescape Torment) but, up to now, they have all had at least one thing in common: the player's total control over the heroes of the magical game world. (Even in Thief II, the otherwise thoroughly naughty protagonist Garrett obeys all your keyboard orders.) But in Majesty things are different...

UNRULY SUBJECTS

The designers, Cyberlore, bill the game as a 'fantasy kingdom simulator.' The player acts as monarch to yet another troubled realm, but here your citizens have minds of their own, so they refuse to form-up in regiments or obey orders. All you can do is tax them and offer rewards from your state revenues for exploration and killing monsters.

Most of the 20 scenarios begin with a lot of blackness obscuring the map and the player possessing nothing but a small castle, and a couple of hero-producing guild buildings. Click on a guild and you can buy a few heroes, but as soon as these appear on the map they promptly wander off or head for the pub (if there happens to be one). You have no direct control over them whatsoever. All you can do is click on a dark area of the map and plant a flag. This little banner will have a monetary reward attached to it (which comes straight out of your treasury). If one of the heroes you've paid to recruit can spare the time, and is greedy enough, they might wander out to the flag to collect the reward – illuminating a stretch of the all-enveloping fog-of-war.

Naturally, being a fantasy game, there are various roving monsters and fiend- ▸▸

Below: You build buildings, like guilds and inns, to attract heroes to Ardania

From top: **Ardania does at least allow the female gamer to indulge her violent tendencies**

Mark Shaw says... 6.5/10

Majesty looks great and sounds great. The gameplay, however, doesn't meet the standards set by the surface detail. The game's unique management aspect – the setting of reward flags to convince computer-controlled characters to do your bidding – is a neat idea, but one that Cyberlore have not exploited fully. In lieu of direct control over the action, players must try to influence the action by their building choices, setting the aforementioned flags and so on. One major effect of this is that the game is experienced at one remove, a fact that should have been compensated by the amount of effort that has self-evidently been made in designing the different hero types (as well as the enemies). It's to the detriment of the game that, although each character is rendered more lifelike through the use of names, specific sayings and explanations of their actions, favourite or skilled characters cannot be saved and used in other scenarios. It's hard to envisage how this could be made to work in single-player mode; nonetheless, to establish a small town and nurture, say, a Paladin to level nine, to complete the scenario and then to have to start from scratch in the next mission is a source of constant frustration. On the positive side, multiplayer games provide a more frenetic thrill, albeit one where strategy tends to take a back seat to frantic mouse-clicking.

The game lays claim to a number of subtleties that enable good players to gain advantages (turning the opposition's Rogues against the enemy and the setting of tax routes, for example), but even poor players should find that, once any early scares are survived, the computer takes over and does all the work on your behalf. The usual complaint about games like Majesty is that the AI doesn't do enough; in Majesty, though, there's too much of it on show and, as a result, it fails to rise above the merely average.

Despite the style, Majesty offers little more than a mild diversion to strategy lovers who want any kind of serious or long-term challenge

Majestic heroes

Each of the different guilds and temples allow you to recruit a different class of hero.

Although each guild can only maintain between two to six heroes, you can build multiple guilds of the same type, but at increasing expense.

Your basic hero is the Warrior: they start with good attack and defence skills and these attributes can be strengthened at the blacksmith's shop.

The Warrior is a standard hack-and-slasher with no range skill or magic, but a stone killer at the higher experience levels.

The Ranger, on the other hand, has only a bow to fight with and suffers in close combat. These will push back the fog-of-war on their own initiative and are cheap to turn out, but they too die easily, even at the higher experience levels.

The Wizard is a physical weed, but his magic spells are the best range weapon in the game. These need you to build a library to sell them better magic, but it is well worth the effort.

Rogues are the thieves (or possibly the lawyers) of the Majesty world. They extort money from monster lairs and chase after exploration rewards with glee.

The Rogues also turn-up as NPC monsters – but pop a reward flag on their own lair and they will destroy it for you (the mercenary fools).

Gnomes are nondescript little builders. They aid your builders to construct new guilds and feebly attack monsters now and again.

They're cheap, cute and highly expendable.

Continued on page 52

Continued from page 51

Dwarves are a cross between the Gnomes and the Rogues (in character – not literally).

They hunt rewards with fervour and will build or repair your structures, and. They are also pretty tough fighters.

Elves are supposed to be a dissolute race of gamblers in Majesty – a refreshing change from the whiter-than-white snobs usually depicted in fantasy games.

Nevertheless, their arrows can do a fair amount of damage and they concentrate on defending your settlement while your other heroes are off gallivanting in the wilds.

Cultists worship a chaotic nature god called Fervus. They are weak fighters, but in their favour they can convert animals, like bears, to fight for you.

Warriors of Discord all look like the chief of the road outlaws in Mad Max II. These are the best at hand-to-hand combat, but weak on armour.

Monks become available when you build a temple to Dauros, God of Law. Unlike all the other heroes, these have taken a vow of silence and do not shout annoying catchphrases all the time.

Medium to weak on attack, Monks have various defensive spells to keep them alive.

Paladins also become available from your warrior guilds but only when you have built a temple to Dauros.

Paladins are all women and are the toughest, all-round fighters in the game. (I don't have a problem with that. Do you?) They have one spell – a strength boost given by Dauros.

Adepts are followers of the god Lunord – lord of the moon and wind. These zip about like bars of soap in the bath. The Adepts, like the Elves, concentrate on protecting the community.

Solarii are worshippers of the sun goddess Helia. These cast very good close combat spells and hunt undead with fanaticism.

Healers are recruited in temples to Agrela the goddess of niceness. They do what they are, but also reincarnate themselves once for each level they have earned.

Finally, there are the Priestesses. These female necromancers worship Krypta the death goddess, raise lots of skeletons to fight for you and sound positively grateful when they die.

All in all, in an average game of Majesty, the player can usually expect to have a very ethnically diverse mob wandering about the map by half-way through any particular scenario.

With luck, and assuming that you make the reward flags valuable enough, they may even perform the tasks that you want them to...

Damon Wilson says... 7/10

Majesty is one of the best-programmed games I've seen in a long time. Cyberlore have excelled all the competition with the clever, in-game economic system, the plethora of character classes and their skills and, above all, the excellent artificial intelligence the game displays.

It's just a pity that it's the computer that has most of the fun, while the player sits back and watches like an indulgent parent.

Admittedly, the gameplay can be downright frantic at times, with hordes of yellow (monster) blips emerging from the fog of war on the radar and converging on your hapless little village. There are often moments of great tension as a grotesque horror pounds away at your flaming castle with nary a rescuing hero in sight. You desperately rack up the reward on the monster's head and wait with bated breath. Then, just as you think you will have to play the scenario all over again, a barrage of fireballs and arrows whooshes from the edge of the screen and thirty seconds later the beast is dead. It's great 7th-Cavalry-to-the-rescue stuff, but when you've been through it half-a-dozen times it loses its edge.

The fact is that the game pretty well plays itself after you've set up a few guilds and recruited heroes. Once you've learnt the few tricks for keeping alive under assault, your main job is to listen for the death cry of heroes and click a button at the appropriate guild to replace them.

Of course, you can always try to have fun by watching the heroes on their simple little adventures, but you very quickly feel like Gulliver among the Lilliputians: just too high up and divorced from everything to really enjoy yourself.

Cyberlore program like masters, but don't understand the essence of a game is to let the player, not the computer, do the playing.

generating lairs scattered about the landscape. Your heroes will hit these to death of their own accord (just to rifle the change in their pockets) but if you want to prioritise their violent attention on the huge rock golem bearing down on your palace, you can click on it and put a reward on its head. The higher the number of gold pieces, the more heroes will be likely to come for a share of the kill.

PROTECT YOUR ASSETS

There are several of ways you can protect your castle, even if all your heroes are off about their own business – watch towers and spell-firing wizard towers, for example. As long as the area around the castle remains reasonably free of monsters, your citizens will build cottages nearby. These can be taxed by your wandering tax collectors. So, naturally, the safer you and your skiving heroes keep the area, the more gold you can squeeze out of the expanding peasantry. On the other hand, let monsters burn the crofts and kill your

From top: Life – and death – goes on around you, but you'll soon get a strange feeling you're not really that involved with things

tax collectors before they can get your precious gold to safety, and you will soon be facing bankruptcy.

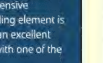
You may say that all this places you more in the position of a chancellor than a monarch: suffering all the financial worries and enjoying none of the military derring-do, but there is still plenty of excitement for the player.

Each scenario has an apparently simple objective – hoard so many thousands of gold pieces, destroy a certain enemy or all the monster lairs, or just survive a set period of time. On the more difficult levels, however, surviving the first five minutes can be dicey, as a dozen dragons or two dozen minotaurs bear down on your little settlement with murder in their hearts.

The key to survival is knowing what to build and when. There are a fair number of specialised buildings you can have constructed, with more available as you upgrade your home castle. Some are fairly mundane (in a fantasy setting, that is). Blacksmiths research improved armour and weapons to sell to your heroes, inns heal and shelter them (for a small fee) when they are far from their home guild, libraries research spells for them to buy and throw about. Other buildings are more unusual – royal gardens sell meditation time for heroes to gain special blessings, fairgrounds let them compete in games (earning experience without risk) for an entrance fee and marketplaces sell them healing potions, rings of protection and teleportation charms.

Barry Ryan says... 5/10

Cyberlore's Majesty has a lot going for it. For a start, it's a fresh take on a genre which has been soundly thrashed to within an inch of its life over the past few years. The game play system is inspired. In fact it's a game which tends to induce one of those, 'it's so simple I can't believe anyone else hasn't thought of it', moments of perfect clarity. I'm an ardent admirer of off-kilter fantasy based games and one of my personal favourites is Red Orb's superlative and cruelly underrated Warlords series. I was expecting a similar experience from Majesty. I can remember being completely non-plussed by my first encounter with a Warlords game. Initially, I was horrified. It looked archaic, indeed almost quaint, and felt a lot like one of those early 8 bit, turn-based fantasy games. But as the hours spent playing it slowly mutated into days and the days into months, I lost myself in one of the most devilishly difficult, genuinely immersive games to grace the PC in years. I was hoping for more of the same from Majesty. It does look good, and the fantasy environment is populated by one of the most comprehensive bestiaries seen in a game of this type. You've got all sorts of interesting heroes, and the guild building element is a great innovation. The gold-based incentive system, around which the game pivots, seemed like an excellent idea. Indeed, in theory, it still is. In practice, however, it falls far short of the mark. It provided me with one of the most frustrating game playing experiences for many a moon. This game will quite happily play itself for hours, the only input you provide is to throw up the odd building here and there while assigning monetary values to various goals. I've rarely felt so generally removed from, and so completely uninvolved with, a game. Majesty should have worked; it must have looked great on paper. Unfortunately, in the final analysis, it falls far short.



Quote

The key to survival is knowing what to build and when. There are a fair number of specialised buildings you can have constructed, with more available as you build your home castle

Unquote

MONEY-GO-ROUND

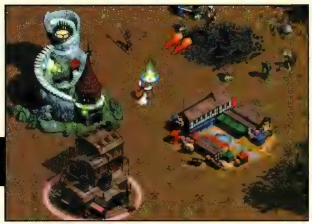
You will note from the above that the reward money paid to heroes soon gets back into the community – where your tax collectors collect much of it and bring it home to daddy. This functioning economic cycle is fundamental to the mechanics of the game and is one of the innovative ideas that Cyberlore are justly proud of. When the fighting dies down for a moment, the player can sit back and watch their little capitalist community functioning and indulge a feeling of monarchical benevolence.

The multiplay option allows several players to fight monsters on the same map. Their heroes will consider each other as friends and protect each other's settlements – until one player or another puts a reward flag on another's building or hero... that means war. Of course, it's all very well to have a game in which the AI does all the fighting for you – just so long as its up to the job. But, once again, Cyberlore are as proud as punch over their program design. The heroes each have a set of priorities, defined by their character class (see the Majestic Heroes Box). Exploration, monster hunting, community defence, self-preservation and ruthless greed – all have their pull on each hero's decision making process.

Each hero gains experience points as well as money from fighting for your cause, so a weedy magician's apprentice at the start of a scenario can become a fire blasting, near demi-god by the end. Each little sprite has an individual name and can be followed on their adventures by an attentive player.

Add to this the fact that the program can handle dozens of heroes and monsters – all doing their own thing – with very little slow down on a standard issue PC. At the very least, the monarch will have something interesting to watch.

PCSL



Right: Excellent, crisp graphics – but where's the beef?

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	8	COMPLEXITY	3
SOUND FX	6	INTERFACE	7
MUSIC	5	MULTIPLAY	5
CHALLENGE	4	GAMEPLAY	3
REALISM	4	AI	9

Conclusion An extremely promising game idea, graphically well executed; but it's let down by an over eager AI. There's not enough gameplay – the computer does too much, the player too little

6/10

DEVELOPER: WESTWOOD **PUBLISHER:** EA
SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Win 95/98 • Intel Pentium 200MMX • 32Mb RAM • 100MB Hard Drive space (this varies between products though) • 2MB (or more) video card (DirectX 7 compatible) • SoundCard (DirectX 7 compatible)

Tib Sun: Firestorm

It's yet once more unto the breach, dear friends, says **Barry Ryan**

Firestorm is the official expansion pack to Westwood's best selling RTS, Tiberian Sun, the third in the Command & Conquer series. As you're no doubt aware, Westwood was responsible for unleashing the RTS phenomenon on an unsuspecting gameplaying public in the first instance.

It began way back in prehistory with the 8bit Dune 2, based loosely on the rich sci-fi universe created by Frank Herbert. It's a testament to the success of the Command & Conquer formula that, in essence, the game mechanics encountered in its latest incarnation remain virtually unchanged from that original pioneering game.

Dune 2 is the game that launched a multitude of imitators. All have attempted to wrest the RTS crown away from the C&C series, and certainly some looked better while others even played better: but all have failed to supplant the original.

C&C has stubbornly refused to adopt many of the latest innovations in the genre. You won't find a fully-rotatable 3D game engine, you won't get multi-tiered levels of play (even though Tib Sun does incorporate some units with a subterranean capability) and you certainly won't find any of the strategic or tactical depth which some of its competitors display. The graphics engine is still voxel based, the perspective is isometric, and in many respects the game exhibits a pointedly retro look and feel.

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

Firestorm has an impressive pedigree, and strangely enough, in the games industry that can count for a lot. It all began with Dune 2, and was continued by the original

Above: Looks like it's time to send in some of the GDI big boys

Command & Conquer. We were then treated to a prequel, Red Alert, which was set in an alternate universe with distinctly Cold War overtones. Both these games were accompanied with their own official expansion packs.

Westwood then almost killed the goose that laid the golden egg by releasing the utterly awful and instantly forgettable Dune 2000, a remake of the game which had set the ball rolling all those years ago.

Quote

C&C is one of the most lucrative franchises in the computer games industry

Unquote

Tiberian Sun, the third game proper in the C&C series, had an overly long gestation period, which led to speculation that the franchise was a busted flush. It seemed destined to be supplanted by its legion of more graphically sleek derivatives and the gaming press expressed doubts as to the validity of the project. Inevitably, though, when it finally arrived the public voted with their wallets and the game enjoyed the kind of runaway commercial success already experienced by its older siblings.

C&C is one of the most lucrative franchises in the computer games industry. It's a classic case of the 'if it ain't broke don't fix it' approach.

The simple and inescapable fact is that Westwood has repackaged what is essentially the same game on three separate occasions to rapturous reviews and big box office. So it was fairly inevitable that Tiberian Sun would also receive the expansion pack treatment, and as sure as night follows day, here it is.

Firestorm kicks off immediately after the culmination of the campaign presented in Tib Sun. Unsurprisingly, the NOD forces are in disarray after the crushing defeat and apparent death of their leader, Kane. Kane's demise appeared to bode well for GDI, but it seems that a new and possibly even more dangerous NOD leader may be about to emerge.

The GDI have also got other problems to deal with. Their global command net has mysteriously crashed, just as they were about to get their hands on Kane's Tacitus data matrix. The Tacitus matrix is jam-packed with crucial information and data collected by Kane and his Nod scientists during their experiments into genetic mutations precipitated by exposure to Tiberium. The transporter carrying the matrix crashes in North Africa.

The Southern Cross GDI command takes over responsibility for the entire GDI command network; you are assigned as head of the Firestorm taskforce and entrusted with the mission of retrieving Tacitus. Naturally, you can also guide the resurgent NOD forces back to their previous position of omnipotent evil, so assiduously fostered by the twisted genius that was Kane.

HERE COMES THE SUN

The pack comes complete with 18 new single player missions, a respectable amount which should at least provide for a relatively decent long term challenge.

Unfortunately, though, it really is a case of more of the same, and after a while the missions begin to merge into one long blur of desperate, feverish base building, avaricious resource acquisition and large scale pitched battles/base rushes against your opponent.

There's nothing new in terms of gameplay and there's no real innovation on show. It's just a slightly more polished rehashing of Tiberian Sun

Command & Conquer: Renegade

Westwood plans to drag the Command & Conquer franchise screaming into the new millennium with Command & Conquer: Renegade. It's a 3D First Person Shooter set in the Command & Conquer universe (more specifically that of the first C&C offering).

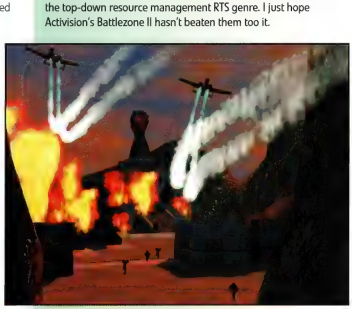
It places you in the role of a GDI commando, Jack Shepherd, who's conducting his own personal dirty little war against Kane and the forces of NOD while the larger conflict rages around him. It's been inspired by the various Ione commando, Cannon Fodder-style missions which graced the original C&C, and indeed have been a feature of every subsequent C&C-related offering.

Westwood has developed its very own 3D engine, and it'll be used to faithfully model and render the structures and vehicles with which we've all become so familiar in the past few years. Ever wanted to know what the inside of a Hand of NOD looks like? Well, it seems that you're about to get the chance. Let's face it, anyone whose played the Command & Conquer series must have speculated at some stage on how the thing would look from a first person perspective. You'll also get the chance to command, or at the very least, catch a ride on, the various vehicles which comprise the extensive C&C armoury.

Personally, I can't wait to commandeer an Orca. I've always had an unnatural and thoroughly inexplicable urge to fly one. Naturally, Westwood also plans to incorporate full multiplay options and it should be interesting to see how this pans out.

From the point of view of the dedicated strategy gamer, we're not sure how much relevance this game's going to have. It may very well end up a simple first person perspective action shooter, in the Quake or Unreal mode. In many respects this would be a great shame, because Westwood has in the C&C franchise a rich seam of untapped possibility. Renegade would certainly lend itself very well to a 'Team Fortress' style multiplay system. At the very least, your commando will be required to infiltrate NOD bases and take out vital structures, which should lend the game some tactical and strategic relevance.

Whatever the result, though, it's good to see that Westwood is preparing to move the Command & Conquer universe away from the top-down resource management RTS genre. I just hope Activision's Battlezone II hasn't beaten them too it.



Barry Ryan says... 5/10

Tiberian Sun Firestorm is a solid add-on, as these things go. It provides the usual unit upgrades and completely new unit designs that we've come to expect. It'll also provide you with a new single player campaign comprising 18 new missions. In this respect, it should at least represent reasonable value for your gaming pound. It's also got some nice new additions to the random map creator, which should allow you to battle over some more diverse and interesting battlefields. Undoubtedly, the most interesting enhancement comes in the form of the World Domination multiplayer mode, which will allow you to battle it out with other commanders in a zero-sum game of world conquest. Incidentally, it also comes complete with 10 new multiplayer maps.

But – and this is a big but – it's an expansion pack for a game which in my view is obsolete and archaic. The Command and Conquer game universe and its associated game engine has been comprehensively flogged to death at this point. There are innumerable games out there which soundly thrash it in all the areas which matter (see Battlezone II, Ground Control and Earth 2150, to name but three).

Its overly simplistic mission design is repetitious and uninspired, graphically it's poor, and it's about as intellectually challenging as a drunken post-pub session of Ludo. You know that cringing, embarrassing feeling you get when you see a once great screen legend (think Telly Savalas in those unbelievably horrific Dirty Dozen sequels) reduced to taking roles in made for TV films? Well, that's exactly how I felt as I progressed through Firestorm. The minor tweaks and additions do nothing to rescue it from its inherent shortcomings and left me (rather heretically) wondering why Tiberian Sun had caused so much excitement on its release.

This one is for hardcore Tib Sun devotees only.

Uninspiring add-on which merely serves to underline how far Tiberian Sun and the C&C series have fallen behind the RTS pack

Above: Where Firestorm really shines is in its World Domination Tour mode for multiplay

Martin Croft says... 7/10

Terrible admission time: I never really played C&C (beyond a couple of demo games on my nephews' machines at Christmas). As far as I was concerned, they were little better than arcade games for kids. Until, that is, Tiberian Sun came along. That game just hooked me completely.

Boy, did I annoy the other guys in the office, demanding that they fill me in on the back story to the previous games, exclaiming in wonder at new units and their abilities and generally raving about something they considered completely old hat. And yes, I had to apologise to my nephews...

Well, I'm a little more jaded now, and I have to say that I can see where they're coming from when they complain that Westwood really hasn't advanced the game much over the past NOD knows how many years. Look at it objectively, and it's true that Firestorm is very much more of the same.

But so what, I say – Firestorm provides loads of new units and missions and, quite frankly, that's enough to keep me happy. And I'm really looking forward to giving the new multiplay campaign a thoroughly good testing. Sure, I expect to lose, badly, against all the C&C experts I've got around me. But I'll be having fun – they'll just be moaning about how passe it all is.

On a more serious note, though, while I did enjoy playing the new missions in Firestorm, the questions of just how much more Westwood can flog this particular dead horse is one that need to be answered. After all, I still enjoy playing hex and turn-based PC wargames, but I do recognise that in many ways the genre is stuck in something of a time-warp.

Now the C&C series and its clones are beginning to look just as outdated. Are you listening, Westwood? It's time to move on.

Fun for Tib Sun lovers, but no real innovation. If you want more than more of the same, probably not worth it – except for the multiplay

Above: Limpet drones scout by attaching themselves to enemy units

and I found it really trying my patience and testing my willpower.

Now, don't get me wrong, when Command & Conquer first appeared I was completely smitten with it. Even now, I shudder to think of the large portion of my young adult life which was squandered in the playing of it. It was, and indeed still is, a truly brilliant game. The problem now is that it all looks rather long in the tooth.

Look at the review elsewhere in this issue of Earth 2150, a game which comprehensively trounces Tib Sun and Firestorm combined in every single department. Then look at the preview section – you'll find Ground Control and Force Commander. Both of these games move away from the traditional resource management RTS, embodied by the C&C series, by eliminating resource gathering and collection altogether.

The RTS genre is very much alive and kicking, and brimming with all sorts of innovation; but this fact seems to have eluded the developers of Tib Sun. Or perhaps it doesn't impinge on their considerations, since they know that because it carries the C&C logo, it will sell, and sell well. They've doggedly persisted with the tried and tested formula which has served them so well in the past.

As is the norm with Westwood add-on packs, Firestorm incorporates a number of new and uprated GDI/Nod units and structures. The GDI forces get enhanced jump jet infantry, which move faster and now possess the ability to detect cloaked bases or units from the air. They'll also get a new version of the deployable sensor array, which can now detect not only subterranean and invisible units but also limpet drones and mines. The EMP cannon has also had it's destructive power and mine clearing ability considerably enhanced.

Completely new GDI units include a mobile EMP cannon and the excellent infantry drop pods (available in multiplayer only), which allow you to drop elite groups of infantry anywhere on the global map.

Both factions now get mobile war factories and limpet drone technology. Limpet drones will attach themselves to anything larger than an infantry unit and play havoc with their electrics, while revealing any

Above: A familiar sight for all Tiberian Sun fans. Prepare for battle!

terrain passed over by the targeted unit. Nod forces also acquire the reaper unit, which has an anti-personnel netting launcher, capable of substantially disrupting massed groups of GDI infantry. In keeping with Tib Sun, there are also a number of secret units which will be introduced as the game progresses.

There's only one major enhancement to the command and control system. You can now select all units of a particular type by first selecting that unit and then pressing T. This is an invaluable tool when it comes to leading effective base assaults. You can now select all long range artillery units on screen and have them target a base's nerve centre.

NOD ON THE NET

Where Firestorm really does expand on the possibilities of its parent game is in the multiplay arena. The random map generator has acquired a number of new features. You can, for example, now play on a heavily mutated map, which has succumbed to the ravages of Tiberium poisoning, and you can also now add Veinhole Monsters to a random map. You should be careful when choosing this option though, because these things tend to expand at an exponential rate and can seriously affect gameplay.

Ion storms can now be incorporated into your random map, as can day/night transitions.

But perhaps the greatest innovation is the addition of an entirely new multiplayer treat; the World Domination Tour. Effectively, GDI and Nod commanders go head to head on a global map in a contest to decide who rules the world.

Now this is more like it: it represents a truly worthy addition to the Tib Sun universe. Players will slug it out on pre-defined maps, with the results of these battles deciding who controls a particular territory, and the battle lines are in a constant state of flux.

Firestorm is a solid, if uninspiring expansion pack. Playing it merely serves to underline how antiquated and obsolete the basic Command & Conquer game mechanics and graphic engine have become. This isn't surprising, given that the thing has been around for donkeys years without undergoing a single major nuts and bolts style overhaul. But let's face it, if you're a Tib Sun fanatic, you're going to buy this regardless of anything we say or do to convince you otherwise. If, however, you're becoming a little tired of the C&C bandwagon and it's constant repackaging of a fundamentally obsolescent game, we'd advise you to give it a wide berth, and in the process save your pennies towards a title which at least has something new and different to offer. It's time for Westwood to take their considerable creative talents back to the drawing board to give us something which will set the gaming world alight again, much like the original C&C did on its release.

Come on, guys, put the old warhorse out to pasture and give us some new toys to play with. PCSG.

Damon Wilson says... 7/10

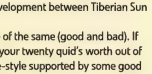
Considering the hordes of fever-eyed, Command & Conquer fans out there, I'm about to make what might be a life threatening confession: I never played the game.

I played Dune 2 to death, way back in 1993 then, when Westwood started to release the C&C series a few years later, I took a look at the reviews and thought: "It's Dune 2 with a different story and slightly improved graphics... why bother?"

Having played Tiberian Sun, at the end of last year when it came into the PCSG office, I have to admit that I was partially wrong. The game graphics are virtually an insult by today's standards and the FMV cutscenes would make five-year-olds wince with embarrassment, but the actual game levels are clever, thoughtfully designed and involving. But I still can't see how there's eight years worth of development between Tiberian Sun and good old Dune 2.

Now Westwood have provided us with a Tiberian Sun add-on pack with more of the same (good and bad). If you have already bought Tiberian Sun and enjoyed it, then I'm sure you will get your twenty quid's worth out of this pack. If you bought it and, like me, thought it was a creakingly ancient game-style supported by some good level design, you wont...

The whole point of this sort of addition to a game is to continue its longevity, and TS: Firestorm certainly does that. Plenty of new levels, units and multiplay options. Yet I can't help feeling that Westwood are flogging this tired old horse to death. With games like Battlezone II and Earth 2150 cutting new edges out there, Tiberian Sun is beginning to look more and more like a throwback to the 486 Age.


As with all expansion packs, you'll love Firestorm if you loved the original game. If you haven't played Tiberian Sun yet, look elsewhere

Below left and right: Eighteen new single player missions provide new challenges for Tiberian Sun aficionados

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	6	COMPLEXITY	8
SOUND FX	7	INTERFACE	7
MUSIC	5	MULTIPLAY	8
CHALLENGE	6	AI	8
REALISM	6	GAMEPLAY	6

Conclusion The C&C bandwagon is finally beginning to grind to a halt. Firestorm is a large helping of more of the same, dished up in a rather unappetising manner

6/10

Competitions

WIN a copy of Airport Inc – and two FREE flights with Virgin Express!

You may have noticed that we've got a demo of Airport Inc, developed by Krisalis and published by Take 2, on our cover CD this month – yes, really! You may also have noticed that we were supposed to have had the demo on the cover CDs for both the last two issues, but didn't, due to circumstances beyond our control.

Anyway, Take 2 has offered us a bumper box of goodies to assuage the hurt feelings of any of our loyal readers who might have spent hours trying to load a demo that wasn't there. So we're able to offer five superb prize packages, each comprising a boxed copy of Airport Inc and two vouchers for FREE flights on Virgin Express.

The Virgin Express Free Flight vouchers entitle the user to a *free return flight to Brussels with Virgin Express, flying from either Heathrow or Stansted (*excluding any applicable airport taxes). The user then has the option to fly on to Copenhagen, Rome, Madrid, Milan or Barcelona for an exclusive low supplement. The vouchers are valid until December 31st 2000, and Virgin Express requires 30 days notice of intended flight date.

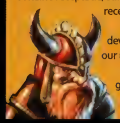
To enter the Airport Inc competition, look at the questions below and write your answers in the space provided on the coupon. Fill in the rest of the coupon and send it off to us at the address provided. The first five correct entries drawn from an opaque container will win. Who knows? You might soon be the proud manager of your own airport – and you could even be jetting around Europe picking up ideas for just where to put those duty free shops...

Question 1 Name an airport which serves London.
Question 2 Name an airport which serves Paris.
Question 3 Name an airport which serves Rome.

WIN Prima's Official Strategy Guide to Majesty!

Just name three of the different hero types in Majesty: Sovereign of Ardania.

Those nice folk at Prima have given us 10 copies of their Official Strategy Guide to Majesty: The Fantasy Kingdom Sim to use in a competition. So if you want a chance to win one of them, all you have to do is answer the question above, fill in the coupon below and post it off to PC Strategy Games. Once we've had them all, the correct entries will be placed in a suitable receptacle, stirred thoroughly and 10 names will be selected. Winners should receive their guides by mid-August



If you want to know more about Majesty: Sovereign of Ardania, developed by Cyberlore and published by Hasbro, take a look at our review starting on page 50 of this issue.

If you want to know more about Prima's collection of game guides, take a look at www.primagames.com for details of the latest titles and forthcoming releases.

PC Strategy Games June 2000 competition entry form:

Airport competition

Question 1 _____

Question 2 _____

Question 3 _____

Prima Official Guide to Majesty competition

Question 1 _____

Question 2 _____

Question 3 _____

You must fill in the next section (or we can't send you your prize, can we?)

Name _____

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All entries must be received by June 30, 2000. One entry per person. You may photocopy this entry form. No purchase necessary. The editor's decision is final. No correspondence will be entered into.

☐ Please tick this box if you do not wish to be added to our mailing list.

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You don't have to answer the following questions to win, but they'll only take a minute...

How many strategy games do you buy a year? _____

What's your favourite strategy game? _____

Please tick the relevant box:

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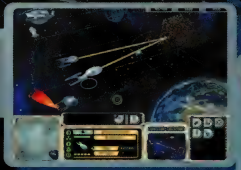

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Airport Inc

***Damon Wilson** tackles terrorists and timetables in Take 2's airport management sim*

DEVELOPER: KRISALIS **PUBLISHER:** TAKE 2 INTERACTIVE
SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
• Pentium 200 MHz • Win 95/98 • 4X CD-ROM • 16 Mb RAM • 300 Mb Hard Drive space • DirectX compatible Sound Card • 4 MB DirectX compatible Video Card • Direct X version 6

Above: Er... What do I do now, tower?

Short of a hydroelectric dam or a nuclear waste facility, the most controversial building project for a town is an airport. Now, at last, there is a game that will let the player be the bad guys – sorry – the thrusting entrepreneurial spirits, keen to exploit the growing boom in air travel. Airport Inc lets you design, build and manage your own international airport on any of the world's continents (apart from Antarctica).

Some business management sims are light-hearted spoofs (like Therme Park World and Pizza Syndicate), but Airport Inc is definitely not one of those. Every aspect of airport management, from the number of runways to the position of the VIP toilets, is available for the player's meddling hands. Over and above such crass engineering problems, you will need to negotiate with airlines, deal with security problems and make your staff improve their efficiency for less pay.

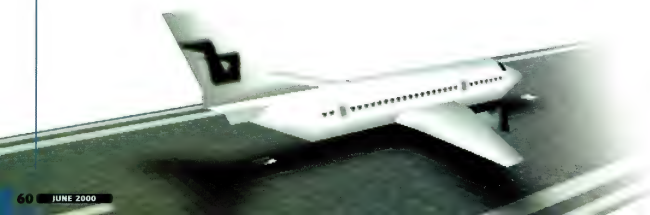
The game claims to put the entire world of airport management at your fingertips and, for once, this assertion seems fairly valid. The game always starts in 1970, and the player has to decide which continent to build upon and which big city, of half a dozen options, to grace with air travel. Choice is further complicated by considerations of the size of the local population, weather conditions and — most importantly – potential demand for local and international flights.

Having decided on a town, the player has a choice of three building locations: near-the-town-centre, a-bit-of-a-way-out, and off-in-the-next-bloody-country. Naturally, the price of land drops the further away from town you go, but so does the likelihood that customers will be attracted to your airport.

THE BARE NECESSITIES OF LIFE

With land bought (and neighbouring plots optioned to stop competitors blocking your future expansion) the player can start building. The bare minimum for a provincial airport is a runway, a control tower, a fire station, a plane park, a car park and a terminal. All of the above are pre-designed in the Easy level of the game but, in the harder settings, the player must design the terminal buildings themselves.

This can be a highly complicated matter, as anyone who has ever got lost in an airport will understand. Check-in areas, baggage collection points, arrival and departure halls, VIP lounges, shops and toilets all need to be placed carefully in relation to each other,



Martin Croft says... 6/10

I've been a business journalist for 15 years now, and during that time I've played a few business sims. Most of them have been poor games, to say the least. Airport, to give it its due, has a good game lurking somewhere within it, and I can understand why it's achieved the popularity it has with certain groups of gamers. But it's not for me.

To begin with, it's pretty impenetrable. The tutorial doesn't actually tutor you and the guide doesn't guide. I spent ages trying to work out why I couldn't put various buildings in various places, until I eventually discovered that it was because the location was fine, but I had the orientation wrong. Why didn't I get a simple message to say 'turn the building round, stupid'?

Then there's the obsessive level of detail you have to go into. I've known people who have designed airports, and one person is never responsible for placing everything from the ash-trays to the runways.

Some advice if you try the game – always go for prefabricated terminals, rather than kitting the things out yourself. Life's too short.

There's a solid game in here somewhere – but I can't believe many people are going to bother looking for it. This one doesn't take off for me.

Damon Wilson says... 8/10

Airport Inc isn't going to be for everyone. In fact it may only be for a few people, but it is good at what it does. The plain and blocky graphics will put-off some players. The straight-from-the-shoulder business sim approach, with no giant, fire-breathing lizard attacks or UFO's *a la* SimCity, will lose others. But persist a little with it and you'll find it quietly enjoyable.

Even a short period of playshows a lot of research has been put into this game. The result is that, fiddly as organising catering contracts and correctly placing reception desks is, you soon feel you are running a real business (rather than a slightly silly parody like Theme Park World). To calm you from such heady pleasures, the background music is based on the culture of whatever continent you happen to playing on and is actually very well composed.

If the game has a problem, it is the drop-off between the Easy and the Medium and Hard difficulty levels. Easy does too many things for you, but the higher levels demand an almost anal-retentive ability to fiddle with tiny details.

A great game if you like few-frill business sims – but to be avoided at full price if you suspect that sort of thing is boring.

Kristen Bowditch says... 5/10

Airport Inc does itself no favours. After a pitiful tutorial, I was woefully under-prepared for the task of managing a baggage carousel, let alone an airport. And the manual was no help.

The scenarios offer a better intro. I played Beijing 1989, where you have to transform a cargo airport into a passenger hub. But again, too many details. Airlines want dedicated check-in desks before providing services, and I had to click on each desk individually to manually allocate them. Then suddenly everyone wanted lockers; but could I remember which of the many room sub-menus they were in? No.

You waste time placing every single drinking fountain, Tannoy and plant, when passengers are running about with Semtex. You spend hours manually rejecting contracts only to go into the screen seconds later and find 30 more waiting for you. Having said that, contract negotiation and airport planning are very involving and I liked the way new contracts went into detail about the kind of plane that airline would be using. But that was also the problem. Too much detail.

Solid business management sim, let down by excessive attention to detail and an incredibly unfriendly interface. More Aeroflop than Easyjet.

with security areas at all the correct points - and these all have to be designated with at least half an eye on future expansion. Then you have to furnish each area: there are so many choices of item here that the player might be forgiven for thinking that they had accidentally purchased a professional architectural model program rather than a harmless game.

Above: Valet parking is not available, unfortunately

Quote

The game claims to put the entire world of airport management at your fingertips, and, for once, this assertion seems fairly valid

Unquote

Positioning every toilet cubical and fire extinguisher by hand... every check-in desk and block of seats... every baggage carousel and vending machine... every announcement tannoy and security x-ray is *very* fiddly and time consuming. Still, with skill and patience, the player will have an exact, personally planned, scale model of an airport terminal when they have finished. (As the game progresses, you can repeat this process up to three more times.) Then you can enjoy your masterpiece through the first-person, 3D 'passenger-camera,' which follows the hordes of blank-faced travellers as they mill mindlessly about your lovely building.

Of course, with all this interior design, the player might forget the point of the game is to create a thriving business venture. Once you officially open your airport you need to start debating contracts with the airlines.

The cheaper airlines will move in first but, as your reputation grows, the big boys will start to make offers. Each will want good timeslots and will expect your airport to present plenty of happy (and unterrorised) passengers for transport. In return you can hit them for landing and parking fees, catering and passenger charges and various other overheads. Also, when you have built the necessary support facilities, you will have to sort out catering, fuel and cargo contracts, and so forth.

With everything running nice and smoothly, you just have to sit back, watch the cash and passengers flow in, plan expansions and expect some natural disasters and terrorist attacks. The latter are presented, in rather a deadpan fashion, in little mes- ▸▸

Other business games

Business simulations have been around since the beginning of the computer games industry – and, arguably, before that, since many companies were exploring the use of computers for training and for modelling real-life decisions when titles such as Pong or Colossal Cave were still pixels in a programmer's eye...

Business educationalists knew what they wanted to teach their executive students, and if they were doing it in a classroom environment, they would no doubt have been very good at it. But creating something people might actually want to load up and play as a purely leisure activity was frankly beyond them. Until, that is, some bright spark had the idea of combining a business game with something else that was rather more immediately and obviously fun.

Sid Meier's Railroad Tycoon was probably the first game to successfully marry running a business with some fun elements. Taking as its starting point a British boardgame, 1830, Sid's game combines the appeal of a virtual train set with the challenge of managing a business and properly utilising resources. It's still one of the best business games around – in its current incarnation as Railroad Tycoon: The Second Century — and has spawned a number of imitations.

But probably the game which made business truly fun (as opposed to just plain enjoyable) for the first time was Bullfrog's Theme Park. Yes, the challenge in Theme Park is to make money: but the enjoyment comes from the game's many-layered design. It was a blast, and the latest version, Theme Park World, has very successfully built on it (particularly with the possibilities offered by 3D – actually being able to ride the rides yourself, for example, and the brilliantly-wacky designs for the themed Theme Parks).

More recently, we have seen a number of business games being brought into the UK from abroad, in particular France and Germany. The games industry in these two countries is markedly different from the UK or indeed the US, and business games have always been far more popular on the Continent than on this side of the Channel. With increasing internationalisation in the game industry, and the growing power of French and German publishers such as Infogrames, UbiSoft and BlueByte, we'll see far more business games being launched in this country, once they've been translated into English. UbiSoft, for example, plans to release two business games in the next few months. Business Tycoon and Wall Street Tycoon.

The problem is, though, that themes, game mechanics and even aesthetics which appeal to a French, German or Italian audience just don't work with a British one. French company Monte Christo, for example, produced an interesting stock market investment game called Wall Street Trader; but for a British audience, the look of the game – a cross between French films such as City of Lost Children and a kind of Jules Verne-ish retro Victorian style – made it difficult to take seriously.

It seems that the British will only take to business games if they aren't presented in that serious a manner. After all, one of the most popular business management games of recent years has to be Dungeon Keeper 2. Let's face it, it's a business empire Old Horny's running down there – even if the business is evil.

Martin Croft

Above: Leave plenty of space for expansion

sage boxes saying things like: "There was a bomb planted on the last flight out of your airport." As a result, you will occasionally need to redesign and upgrade your security or evacuate the terminal(s) and close dangerous runways. All very bad for business...

Airport Inc seems to want to create a rewarding experience rather than just a bit of fun. When you've got your airport up and running, you can sit back and watch (through the various 3D cameras) the planes land and take-off, the busses, cars and trains arrive and depart, the passengers bustling in and out with suitcases — and the money counter racking skyward — and can feel a genuine sense of achievement.

Best of all, you can build as many terminals as you've got space for, and you'll never ever have to listen to whining from the anti-airport expansion protestors. Bet BAA would like to get Heathrow Terminal 5 operational that easily...

PC GBL

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	6	COMPLEXITY	8
SOUND FX	6	INTERFACE	5
MUSIC	9	MULTIPLAY	n/a
CHALLENGE	7	GAMEPLAY	6
REALISM	8	AI	n/a

Conclusion A cross between a business sim and a model railway (with planes). Fun for some; Hell for many others. A good game underneath it all, but let down by a poor tutorial and support material

6/10

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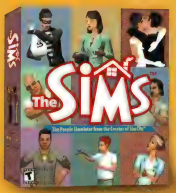

PC CD

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Thief II

***Damon Wilson** joins master thief Garrett in his latest outing around the dark and shadowy city he calls home*

DEVELOPER: LOOKING GLASS STUDIOS **PUBLISHER:** EIDOS

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:

• Pentium 233 • 48 MB RAM • Win 95 / 98 • DirectX 6.1 • 3D accelerated video card • DirectX compatible soundcard • 4X CD Rom • 50 Mb hard drive footprint

Looking Glass Studios, creators of Thief II, have a reputation for producing under-appreciated games that go on to become cults. Their first game, System Shock (released in 1994) was arguably the first of what we now call 3D sneak 'em-ups but at the time it merely bemused an audience expecting yet another Doom clone. System Shock's excellent plot and original gameplay was marred by slightly dated graphics and so it was left on the shelves by the shallow public.

Yet, over the following year or so, the game developed a cult following made up, basically, of everyone who had actually got round to playing it. These enraptured souls waited, with bated breath, for Looking Glass' next offering. They had to bate their breath, in fact, for four years. Looking Glass, rather grumpily, had gone back to the drawing board room and didn't emerge until 1998 with Thief: The Dark Project... and exactly the same thing happened again. Thief's innovative play style whizzed over the heads of

Above: The need for forethought and planning is what makes Thief II very much a strategy game

most of the buying public and went splat on the wall. Then, within a year, it had reached cult status with those astute enough to spot a good thing when they read it on the back of a box.

Now, at last, Looking Glass have stumbled on the true secret to success in the games industry: sequels. What, after all, is the point of ardent fans if you can't re-empty their wallets every year or so a la Tomb Raider? System Shock 2 (released in 1999) hit the top ten immediately and Thief II looks like it might well do the same – given the strong interest shown on the net and in the games' media during its development.

Quote

Now, at last, Looking Glass have stumbled on the true secret to success in the games industry: sequels

Unquote

The original Thief game is set in a pseudo-medieval world in which primitive steam and electrical technologies work side by side with magic. The main character, Garrett, is a young master thief practising his trade in a sprawling metropolis referred to only 'the city'. This town is run by three factions – one open, the others secret. The Hammers are a group of religious extremists dedicated to machinery and control of the elements. Countering them are the Pagans, a sect of nature lovers who – naturally enough – want to reduce mankind to a Stone Age state. Finally, there are the Keepers: a shadowy order who try to maintain the balance between the latter two – manipulating poor Garrett ruthlessly as they do so.

The game itself comprises a series of missions. The player guides Garrett through a 3D world, fulfilling mission objectives. At this point in the description, most would-be buyers switched off, thereby missing one of the best gaming experiences of the late 1990s.

Thief's strength, you see, was not that it added anything new to the old 3D, first-person game, but that it fully took advantage of aspects ignored by previous, more shallow games. To survive in Thief, the player has to be constantly aware of his surroundings. In deep shadow, for example, he is virtually invisible, but carelessly cross a well lit space and he will be instantly spotted and hunted. Every level is a non-stop game of cat-

If you like this...

The Thief games are initially difficult to categorise because Looking Glass Studios broke wholly new ground with them. Initially, they look like standard-issue 3D, first person shoot-'em-ups, but two minutes of play will shatter that illusion. Indeed, a whole new genre had to invented for them: the sneak-'em-up.

The closest game in looks and play style is, unsurprisingly, Looking Glass' other recent release, System Shock 2. In this game, the player takes the role of a secret service trouble-shooter, placed in cryogenic sleep on the first spaceship sent to explore outside the solar system. Waking to find the ship wrecked in orbit around an alien planet, the gamer must sneak about avoiding or quietly killing the grotesque monsters that now infest the ship, hoping to find clues to what has happened. It's an excellent horror-sci fi game that builds nerve-twisting tension through sheer gameplay.

Another game to earn the sneak-'em-up title is Take 2's Hidden & Dangerous. The player commands a small group of WWII SAS men, and takes them through

a series of missions in a 3D world. Again, grinding tension is created by the bare fact that your men are greatly outnumbered by the Nazis, and therefore have to pick them off individually and quietly.

The third game in the PC sneak'em-up stable, sounds – on paper – very like H&D. Eidos' Commandos: Behind Enemy Lines is the same WWII kill quietly formula, but viewed from above on an isometric map. Seen by some as less a combat simulation than a violent puzzle game, Commandos demands either perfect timing or reloading of the previous save position a lot. Too finicky and difficult for many players, it still gives huge pleasure when your man finally manages to sneak-up and ventilate the guard who's kept the rest of your team pinned in cover for the last 20 minutes.

Above: No problem for a master

and-mouse with a guard stopping your heart every few minutes by muttering "Is there someone there? I'll find you, you taffer!" and stalking past within a few inches of your hiding place.

AN EXTRA SENSE

The player also has to use their ears at all times (this was one of the first games to virtually demand the wearing of headphones to play). The sound of a guard's footsteps and their direction could be a matter of life and death, and minimising the noise Garrett makes himself is vital to his success and survival. Of course, Garrett isn't always a hunted victim. As soon as that annoying guard has wandered past, you can rise-up and knock him on the head. You can even – if you feel vicious – kill him, but here again, Thief broke new ground by actually failing the player if they kill people on the higher difficulty settings and on some of the later levels. Strange, that – a title about professional theft setting a new moral tone....

The mission objectives start off fairly straightforwardly – steal so much, avoid killing, escape in one piece etc. But as the game progresses, they become more involved with the intriguing plot line. Finally completing the game felt like finishing a good novel, which is an aspect that should surely be encouraged in PC games. So much for the original Thief: is Thief II: The Metal Age as good? The plain answer is yes; but much of the reason is that Looking Glass hasn't changed much of the winning formula. In fact, they have obviously listened to the views of the (largely satisfied) players of the first game and where they have made changes, they've done so subtly.

Garrett is still freelancing about 'the city' as a professional thief, but the Pagans are now a spent force (thanks to his victories in the previous game) and a new group – the ultra-technologist Mechanists – are out to spoil his evenings.

The game starts off with a couple of simple missions, largely intent on acquiring other people's goods, but even here the designers have added a clever new twist. Players of the first game complained that most of the character interaction was too simple and pre-scripted. So, in the first mission of Thief II, Garrett not only has to lift the merchandise, but also needs to clear a route of guards so a love-struck friend can rescue a damsel. It's simplistic, maybe, but very

Below: I have a cunning plan – run and hide!

Mark Shaw says... 8/10

Unlike the other reviewers, I come to Thief 2 having not played the original. I know nothing of the game's heritage, nor, surprisingly enough, any of Looking Glass Studio's other projects. Questions of similarity and innovation, therefore, are of little concern. It's evident that the failure of the original to sell in anything like the quantities that Barry and Damon feel that it should have done is down to the uniqueness of the gameplay. My instinct, on firing up the game, was to tool up and annihilate anything that moved and most things that didn't. Finding myself without weaponry or the license to use it led initially to feelings of nakedness. Soon, however, the need to sneak through the different levels, to employ different tactics as opposed to bigger weapons and to learn how to use the environment became self-evident. This, of course, is what the game is all about.

To have incorporated a Rogue Spear-style level planner, thus placing Thief 2 squarely within the Strategic camp, would have removed the skill and tension from the game. While I still have reservations about whether we here at PCSG are justified in reviewing The Metal Age, it's clear that the amount of thought, planning and intelligence needed to play the game is similar to that of any other strategy game. More importantly, perhaps, is that, regardless of how you wish to label Thief 2, it's a fine game, a substantial challenge and, most importantly, a lot of fun. Games such as Thief 2 (and they are few and far between) rely on two things: the strength of the AI and the attention paid to level design. Both are keenly balanced, making for a unique and uniquely rewarding gaming experience

If few changes have been made between the original and this sequel, it's because Looking Glass knew they were doing something right all along

Damon Wilson says... 9/10

Thief II is a great game. Its clever plot and thoroughly hateable villains will keep the player riveted to the end. Missions start with a set number of objectives but, as often as not, these will change completely as the player progresses towards the end of the level, meaning that they have to be ready for some new surprise at any moment.

The gameplay is as tough and excellent as it was in the first game, largely because it's mostly unchanged. Expect to enjoy many delighted 'Ha! Got you!' moments, as previously infuriating guards and monsters slump to the floor. But, likewise, expect to be doing a lot of (painfully slow) re-loading, because those moments are damn hard to achieve.

Even the graphics, apparently unchanged to the untrained eye, have been tweaked in the right places. The game now boasts coloured lighting, weather-effects (which muffle noise and ease concealment) and Garrett's numerous opponents are now modelled in higher detail and come in various new outfits and species.

If I have any gripes about the game, they are fairly cosmetic. It is still outrageously difficult to search unconscious bodies, but pick-pocketing alert guards is comparatively simple. This may encourage the player to play with panache rather than thuggery, but it's hardly realistic, is it?

Also, the interactive light effects in the game (once Looking Glass's proudest boast) are looking rather unrealistic compared to similar 3D games now on the market. Open a door into a well-lit room, for example, and the light pointedly fails to flood out.

I'm still willing to be enamoured of Thief II, but Thief III had address these points, or I'll get stroppy.

If this game had included multiplay and had eliminated just a few more of the minor faults of Thief, it would have earned a score of 10 out of 10

Above: Imagine he's a baby seal, and just start clubbing away

touching... Other changes include an all but complete removal of the zombies that spoiled the first game for some. Looking Glass apparently feared that a game without any Rambo-esque fighting would fail, but players responded, demonstrating that stealing stuff beats shooting zombies every time. In fact, there are some zombies in Thief II, but you have to look for them.

SEAMLESS TRANSITION

This last may sound like a little thing, but it points to Looking Glass' overall attitude to this sequel and why they believe it will find a satisfied audience. Rather than completely redesign the game, they have left things like the graphic engine all but unchanged and the method of play virtually identical; in fact, a player could move from the first game to the second, barely noticing the change.

The differences are in subtle things like the increased size and complexity of the levels, improved guard AI and the addition of some new gadgets – a remote camera,

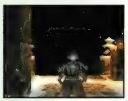
Left: Use the shadows to your advantage

Killing me softly

Sneak 'em ups are very definitely in vogue on the PC at the moment. They certainly constitute a welcome respite from the unleavened diet of action FPS and resource management RTS we've had recently. Strangely, though, for a sub-genre that lends itself so well to the PC platform, it's the console developers who have stolen an early march.

In fact, these games are proof positive that consoles and console developers can offer an astonishingly deep strategic challenge when the urge takes them. If you thought owning a console was about driving games, platformers and action sports sims, a quick gander at the following titles should change your mind.

TENCHU STEALTH ASSASSINS



In Activision's Tenchu Stealth Assassins, you are a Ninja in feudal Japan, righting wrongs and battling evil. It's a third person perspective game, and stealth and cunning are the order of the day. You're armed with an impressive array of weaponry from the ubiquitous shuriken to the venerable samurai sword. The missions are difficult, demanding and place a premium on mental agility.

METAL GEAR SOLID

One of the best games to emerge in recent years on any platform in any genre. It's a contemporary stealth 'em up where you get to play the hard smokin' Solid Snake (heavily reminiscent of Escape From New York's Snake Pliskin.) Snake's equipped with an array of high-tech equipment including sniper rifles and infra red scopes. If you've resisted the console revolution, this game alone is excuse enough to jump on the bandwagon. In a class of its own.

SYPHON FILTER

Eidetic's Syphon Filter and the imminent Syphon Filter 2 provide similar paying experiences, although slightly less accomplished.

PC SNEAK 'EM UPS – COMING SOON!

For console owners, the Sneak 'em up genre well and truly runneth over. But what about the PC Gamer? Fret not; we're in for a veritable avalanche of titles which incorporate considerable 'stealth' elements.

Pyro's Commandos 2 will boast an up-rated graphics engine which will allow you to see inside buildings and provide a fully rotatable camera. It'll also come replete with scenarios culled from WWII legend, including Colditz and the infamous Bridge on the River Kwai.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing forthcoming releases will be Ion Storm's Deus Ex. It's an FPS (using the Unreal engine) with a twist. You can play it as a brainless Rambo type, by allowing your character to develop along that particular career path. But if you fancy a more covert, stealth-based approach you can create a character who has healthy knowledge of the dark arts of hacking, spying and generally doing dodgy things with dodgy people in darkened rooms.

Meanwhile, Norwegian developers Innerloop are currently working on Project IGI. They characterise the game as a 'first person thinker shooter' which will require the type of subtle approach which pays dividends in games like Hidden & Dangerous or Rogue Spear.

Above: You've got to pick a pocket or two
Below: Come here often?

invisibility and slowfall potions and several things that explode on demand.

The level objectives are also more demanding, in that they force the player to use all Garrett's skills. There is a mission, for example, where the player has to frame a policeman for stealing evidence. Garrett has to break into the police station, find the copper's office and steal a personal possession. Then he has to leave this in an evidence room, take a confiscated box of loot and hide it in the copper's office. Then he has to escape. This may sound easy to a Thief veteran, but tell them that they have to do all this without knocking a single guard unconscious and watch them blanch. Trust me, sneaking-about and legging-it skills are pushed to the limit by this mission.

Quote

On paper, the changes to Thief II look petty enough, but they make a big difference to the gameplay if used properly

Unquote

Barry Ryan says... 8/10

I'm hopelessly biased in favour of Thief or indeed anything remotely Thief related. I loved the original game, dodgy AI, surplus of zombies and less than coherent level design and all – but the concept was great, it had an excellent storyline, I loved the overall aesthetic and it also forced me to actively consider other tactical options than killing everything that moved.

Also, embarrassing as this is to admit, in my dark distant past, I played AD&D rather obsessively and my character was, yes, you've guessed it, a thief. So Thief gave me the opportunity to indulge all my unfulfilled roleplaying-related fantasies.

Thief II thankfully dispenses with the surfeit of zombies. Obviously, with Thief, Looking Glass tried to straddle the fence by incorporating equal parts stealth and action. It didn't really work – all we, the gaming public, wanted to do was skulk about thieving and regularly coshing (human) adversaries.

Looking Glass has responded to this, and while the odd zombie does rear its misshapen head in The Metal Age, thankfully, they're few and far between. No, the emphasis is very firmly on the ignoble art of thieving, and Garrett, our anti hero, has received a number of timely additions to his inventory to facilitate this development. Scouting orbs, a zoom function (courtesy of Garrett's mechanical eye) and vine arrows which will stick to anything. The level design is inspired and executed on a substantially larger scale than the original, and the challenges are far more difficult, subtle and demanding. Thief II is an excellent sequel and, in many ways, is the game Thief should have been from the get-go.

Worthy successor to the original. An altogether more accomplished game, with larger levels. Better AI and, most importantly of all, more thieving

Some previews have looked at Thief II, seen that it looks almost identical to its year-and-a-half-old precursor, and sniffily described it as Thief 1.5. This, I think, misses the point of what Looking Glass have tried to do: that is, create an on-going series of games that run seamlessly from one to the other, but still expand the gameplay possibilities at each episode. On paper, the changes to Thief II look petty enough, but they make a big difference to the gameplay if used properly.

That said, no matter what the designers have aimed to create, the question that has to be answered is, is Thief II going to be of interest to the readers of a magazine about strategy games? The very fact that you are reading this review points to the fact that we at PCSG think so.

Elsewhere in this issue, we've got a debate as to what constitutes the outer borders of strategy gaming, particularly as it relates to the RPG genre.

As with RPGs, the Thief games fall within a grey area, at the borders of strategy gaming and something else. But in their defence, they certainly demand cerebral, as well as intellectual, strength on behalf of the player. Each level-map offers several routes to the various objectives, all of which need to be scouted and considered. Then, once one of them has been selected of the best route, it will have to be tactically cleared of guards. Skill and timing are not enough to get through many levels – getting into the fourth storey of a doorless tower surrounded by watchful guards, for example, calls for the ability to extrapolate and plan in three dimensions.

That's strategy, in our book. PCSG.

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	8	COMPLEXITY	7
SOUND FX	9	INTERFACE	8
MUSIC	5	MULTIPLAY	n/a
CHALLENGE	8	AI	9
REALISM	6	GAMEPLAY	7

Conclusion Thief II isn't a game for everyone, but if you loved gentlemen thieves like Raffles and Cary Grant in To Catch A Thief, get hold of a copy. You'll love this game.

8/10

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Rogue Spear: Urban Operations

***Barry 'Grenade Boy' Ryan** tries out the new weapons and maps in Red Storm's Rogue Spear expansion pack, which brings terrorism home to the inner cities*

DEVELOPER: RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT **PUBLISHER:** TAKE 2 INTERACTIVE

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS:
- Pentium 266 mhz MMX • 32 MB RAM • Win 95/98 • DirectX 6.0
- DirectX Compatible video card • 4X CD Rom • 300 MB Hard Disk space.
- Additional 100MB of space for Windows swap file allocation •

Above: Today's recipe is for terrorist soup

Urban Operations, the eagerly awaited expansion pack for Red Storm's superlative squad based tactical shooter, Rogue Spear, has finally arrived.

In Rogue Spear, you are in command of an elite anti-terrorist squad known as Rainbow Six. R6 is a cosmopolitan band of highly trained operatives, who run about dealing with various international crises, as and when they arise.

The game provides both tactical and strategic level gameplay all wrapped up in a lovely 3D FPS engine. The strategy comes in during the pre-mission planning phase where you allocate routes and issue commands to your eight-person squads (which can be split up into up to four separate teams in-game).

The tactical element takes place as you adapt your strategy to the actual realities on the ground. In other words, when it all goes pear shaped — as it inevitably must, because as all us hardened battle tacticians know, no plan ever survives the first contact — you need to be able to think on your feet.

So you need a sound strategic brain, a good tactical mind and a quick trigger finger, an excellent blend of attributes which combine to create what is, for my money, the best game in the squad level tactical first shooter sub-genre. And if all that weren't enough, it happens to be one of the finest multiplayer experiences available, providing a welcome break from the endless rounds of mindless Quake-esque fraggings which begin to wear a little thin after a while.

Consequently, the promise of getting our hands on Urban Ops set our hearts all a-flutter. The essential game mechanics remain unchanged and anyone familiar with Rogue Spear will feel immediately at home.

But the big difference you'll notice from the outset is that a lot of time and attention has been lavished on the creation of the new levels. They're larger, more complex and considerably more devious than their counterparts in the original game. There are a lot more blind corners, difficult to navigate 'open areas' and perhaps most disturbingly of all a number of devilish, well, 'murder holes', which see you progressing down an apparently innocuous passageway, only to be shot in the back from above and behind.

Red Storm has also included five classic levels updated from the original Rainbow Six, which look and play exceedingly well in the up-graded Rogue Spear engine.

New locations include an Egyptian Bazaar, the London Underground, a hotel in Hong Kong, a Venetian palazzo and a tenement in Mexico city, all of which should ensure that your team become the most well travelled counter-insurgency experts in history. You'll be going up against a fairly diverse bunch of opponents ranging from the Chinese Triads to Northern Irish Loyalist terrorists who have decided to start bombing London.

My biggest disappointment was the discovery that Urban Ops only offers four new weapons to augment the Rogue Spear armoury.

Three are light machine guns. The M249 SAW, the light squad support weapon of choice for the US army, will be instantly familiar to anyone whose played the Half-Life add-on Opposing Force. It holds 200 rounds and is capable of laying down a withering burst of concentrated fire. The Heckler & Koch HK21E3 is a very similar weapon which performs a practically identical function, as indeed does the Soviet designed RPD. An archaic weapon which has been around since the end of the second World War, the RPD is generally found in the hands of the terrorists and can devastate a squad in seconds. Watch out for it.

JUST A LITTLE BIT BIGGER

Obviously, these weapons are a direct response to the legions of Rogue Spear fans who wanted to get their hands on something with a little more firepower than was standard. Be careful, though, as these things can be woefully inaccurate – don't even think about using them in claustrophobic, confined situations, where they're worse than useless.

Above: One tooled-up squad member

The fourth addition to your squad's arsenal comes in the shape of the AWS Systems 'Covert' silenced sniper rifle. It fires a sub-

Martin Croft says... 8/10

Rogue Spear is the first FPS shooter I've ever really liked, so when I heard about Urban Ops I was in two minds. On the one hand, I hoped it would be good, while on the other, I expected it to be a disappointment (like just about every expansion pack you can name).

Well, I shouldn't have doubted Red Storm's development team. They've taken a brilliant game and made it even better. The new maps are excellent (take a close look at what's on sale in the Turkish bazaar – and as for the Venetian scenery, well, I liked it so much, I'm off there ASAP for a romantic terrorist hunt).

Not that terrorist hunts are a pushover any more – they've become much more of a threat without being turned into superhumans.

Some people are going to be disappointed with the relative paucity of new weapons, but I'm not that fussed over the hardware. I'm more of an environment man, myself, so I'm happy.

What an add-on pack should be. Good solid extended play. If you like Rogue Spear, then you'll be thanking Red Storm for coming up with this one.

Mark Shaw says... 9/10

There are those who feel that games like Rogue Spear do not constitute strategy games. Urban Operations should change their minds. With improved enemy AI, more innocent bystanders to avoid and some fiendishly difficult missions – the level designers have pulled out all the stops – it's less an FPS and more of a serious challenge. Most games are won or lost at the planning stage. Selecting the best team, keeping the various members alive by plotting the best routes through each scenario and equipping them correctly pays more dividends than diving into each level with guns blazing. Most add-on packs are little more than a cynical means of extending a game beyond its natural life; Urban Operations bucks the trend by providing so much more. Maps from Rogue Spear's previous incarnations that can be played in a variety of new ways. The new levels and weapons alter the focus of the game, making it a more subtle, cerebral challenge.

We've said it before and we'll say it again: Rogue Spear is truly the thinking man's FPS, and Urban Ops just makes it better.

Barry Ryan says... 8/10

Urban Operations is a worthy expansion pack for a number of reasons. Firstly, it genuinely lives up to the name – it really does expand the game's possibilities. It's not just a couple of new maps cobbled together and passed off as an add-on. By incorporating Red Storm's very own map editor and making the game considerably more mod-friendly, it considerably extends and enhances multiplayability. There are a number of new weapons to placate the gun-nuts amongst us, and the new single player campaign levels are thoughtfully designed and well implemented. Terrorists exhibit more cunning, and with hordes of civilians trundling about the place, the game demands a new level of tactical subtlety. We also get to dish out death and destruction in some exceedingly picturesque locations, including Venice and Hong Kong. For the Rogue Spear fan, this expansion pack should become an essential purchase.

Excellent expansion pack, truly worthy of the name. A must for Rogue Spear fans. But where's all those extra weapons gone?

sonic round, which is great when it comes to the question of stealth but not so good in terms of accuracy and penetration.

MINE, MINE, ALL MINE

The development team also dabbled with the idea of proximity mines, but apparently they unbalanced gameplay. If you can't live without them though, we are informed that you can add them with a simple mod.

The new levels have also become a lot more populous, with innocent civilians wandering around. This can considerably hamper your terrorist killing activities, and requires a more measured and systematic approach than was previously the case. Terrorist AI has also been uprated — and it seems that your computer-controlled team members can think faster on their feet, too. But it's the terrorists you need to watch for — they've now got the reactions of fighter pilots and will make you pay for even a moment's hesitation. They've also become partial to lobbing a grenade or two in your general direction. The Rogue Spear environment has definitely become a more dangerous place for both you and your squad members.

Rogue Spear was a multiplaying triumph and has garnered legions of fanatical supporters who created their own weapons mods and level designs to enhance the experience. Want to play with all the standard NATO weaponry? There's a mod. Like to see the Rogue Spear universe through the eyes of a terrorist? You can do that, too.

Red Storm has taken all this on board and considerably enhanced the multiplayer possibilities by ensuring that Urban Operations is extremely mod friendly. They've also included a Rogue Spear map editor which will allow you to create your own single and multiplayer maps, as well as modifying current missions. For the dedicated Rogue Spear multiplayer fan, this is nothing short of manna from heaven, and should see a whole rash of multiplay maps becoming available in double quick time.

There's also a new mission type, the 'defend' option, which essentially turns the tables on you, and sees wave after wave of terrorists descend upon you and your squad with the intention of filling you as full of as many holes as possible.

Above: Venice – don't look now...

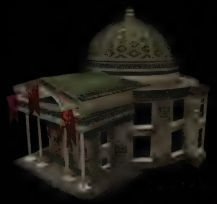
Urban Operations addresses many of the minor niggles encountered in Rogue Spear, and shows Red Storm has listened to what the game's fans have been saying. PCSG

PC STRATEGY GAMES THE VERDICT

GRAPHICS	7	COMPLEXITY	8
SOUND FX	8	INTERFACE	7
MUSIC	7	MULTIPLAY	9
CHALLENGE	8	AI	8
REALISM	9	GAMEPLAY	8

Conclusion An excellent, goody laden expansion pack, which considerably uprates the original game. An essential purchase for Rogue Spear devotees.

8/10



The revolution will be digitised

***Martin Croft** meets **Demis Hassabis,** chess master, Cambridge double first, games designer, programmer and budding virtual revolutionary*

From a base in London's trendy Camden Town, Demis Hassabis is intent on toppling the government of a small Eastern European country. But before any of our readers with contacts in MI5 reach for the phone, relax. Demis' revolution will be entirely imaginary.

Demis – who created Theme Park with Peter Molyneux and was lead programmer on Black & White – is working on a new game to be published in a year's time by Eidos, to be called Republic: The Revolution.

Republic's setting is Novistrana, a fictional republic of the former Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s. Staring with a single loyal supporter, players will try to build up enough support to oust the incumbent president of the republic and take over the machinery of state.

"Geographically, Novistrana – which means new country in Russian – is based on Byelorussia, while culturally and ethnically, it's a mix of the Ukraine and Kazakhstan," Demis says. "I got the idea for the game some years ago when I was spending a lot of time playing two particular board games, Junta and Illuminati. At that time, the television news was full of reports about Yeltsin and stuff. It all came together when I was at college..."

Junta is a classic board game from the mid-1970s, in which players vie for control of a fictitious South American banana republic. Using various groups – students, the Church, the army, the workers – each player is trying to steal as much money as possible and stash it away in secret Swiss bank vaults before having to flee the country when the inevitable revolution comes. Illuminati, on the other hand, is a card game in which players seek to amass influence by taking over different groups in American society, from the FBI through the Boy Scouts to the Sea Monsters.

Neither game, it should be stressed, is entirely serious. So it sounds like Demis had quite a relaxed time at university, playing games and not doing a lot of work. He agrees: "I'd helped Peter Molyneux set up Bullfrog, so basically I was looking at university like it was three years off. I'd take a year off, do a couple of weeks cramming, take the exams, take a year off, do a couple of weeks cramming... I think in the final year, I did about four weeks work."

Quote

Demis started working with Peter Molyneux when he was 15. Theme Park was published when he was 17. He graduated from Cambridge at the age of 20... he's still only 23

Unquote

NOTHINGUSE TALENT

Demis, needless to say, achieved a double first class degree in computer sciences. From Cambridge. Nor should you assume that, just because he'd already set up a company before going up to Cambridge, he was a mature student: he started working with Peter Molyneux when he was 15 – after finishing his A-levels – while Theme Park was published when he was 17. He

Above: Will the citizens bow to your will?

graduated from Cambridge at the age of 20. And he's still only 23.

He may be young, but he's packed an awful lot of games playing into a very short period of time. He was a chess master at the age of 12 (the highest ranked chess player of his age in the world) and represented England on numerous occasions; he won 15 medals at the 1998 and 1999 Mind Sports Olympiads, including golds in the overall event, the Pentamind; he is a second Dan in Shogi (Chinese chess), a first Dan in Go and placed fourth in the 1994 Diplomacy World Championships.

After Cambridge, Demis helped to found Lionhead Studios with Peter Molyneux, Steve Jackson (co-founder of Games Workshop along with Ian Livingstone, now chairman of Eidos) and Mark Webley. He left Lionhead to establish his own company, Elixir Studios, in February 1998.

Republic is to be Elixir's first game, although Demis is already planning the second and has a number of other game designs on the backburner. He was particularly taken with the idea of setting a game in immediately post-Communist Russia for a number of reasons, he says.

"It could have been set in South America, like Junta, or South East Asia. But they'd both been done, and I don't think either one would have given you the same scope. Also, there was a lot of Russian and Soviet imagery and history which had never been drawn on for a game like this."

He's particularly proud of some of the public buildings in the Republic of Novistrana: the development team dug up large numbers of old designs from 1920s and 1930s books, including some plans for grand Socialist monuments which never got built. In real life, that is – many of them now grace the public squares of Novistrana, giving the whole game a sort of Socialist Realist meets Baroque design aesthetic.

FORWARD THE REVOLUTION!

Republic, like all the games Demis has been involved in, is a heavy duty sim, he says, "but with a strong layer of strategy on top". It will feature up to 16 factions, each of which can be human controlled, which will be doing everything in their power to seize control. The biggest threat, though, is the President, who will do everything in his power to stay on top of the heap.

Players will be able to persuade, hire or otherwise recruit a huge range of different specialist characters, including TV presenters, filmstars, generals and archbishops, and will be able to use brainwashing or blackmail as they like. There will be five different strands of play available to players, allowing them to be politicians, businessmen, criminals, religious leaders or generals, and they'll be able to be as ruthless or as merciful as they like.

The aim will be to influence the general population by using specialist characters to conduct different actions, such as »

holding political rallies, broadcasting propaganda, assassinating rival characters, starting riots and fixing the results of football matches. The engine Elixir is developing, Totality, will be capable of rendering an unlimited number of polygons in real time every frame, allowing millions of polys to be used to model each building or character if required.

CINEMATIC QUALITY

You'll be able to zoom smoothly from a satellite image of Novistrana (2000 kilometres square) to focus in minute detail anywhere in the world, with complete camera freedom. There'll be real time light sources, self-shadowing and physically-based material models, Demis says, plus real physics will apply – so parts of a car which has been blown up in an assassination attempt will fly around, smashing windows and denting other cars.

The aim is for the game is two-fold, he says: to have a cinematic quality and feel to it to enhance the playing experience and help suspend disbelief, and to take the programming and gameplay to the limits of the available technology, but not beyond it, Demis claims. "By doing that, we should realise gameplay to the maximum."

Above: The city becomes a political playground

MULTIPLAYER POSSIBILITIES

Republic will also be networkable from release, with up to 16 players able to take part over a LAN. "Later, we'll be looking at adding network play," Hassabis observes. There's also the possibility of turning Republic into a massively multiplayer persistent universe game, particularly given the richness of the setting, he says.

The full game will be playable in between 20 and 30 hours, but while there is a save game facility, Demis recognises that in multiplay games it may not be easy to get the same players together again at the same time (particularly those who are losing badly); so Elixir will also be including a short game, which effectively starts three-quarters of the way through and should be playable in a couple of hours.

Demis is cagey about the next game in the pipeline, but reading between the lines, it sounds like a massively multiplayer title set in a historical milieu – possibly the later Roman Empire, the Dark Ages or Arthurian Britain.

What does Demis do in his spare time?

"I still play a lot of board games, and I'm really getting into Go. We've just hired somebody who's a third Dan [which is higher than Demis, who is first Dan] and I'm playing a game a week with him. I'm learning a lot. And he used to be a professional poker player...

"I'm also playing a surprising amount of Axis & Allies [a Hasbro board game based on World War 2, also available on the PC] which isn't as simplistic as people think. I've played about 30 games now, and I've won every one, using different tactics each time. I've also been playing a bit of Britannia [players control different factions invading Britain, from the Romans to the Normans] which has a lovely underlying mechanism. I particularly like the way it forces you to attack people at certain times to simulate historic events.

"I don't have much time to finish computer games any more. The last one I did was Homeworld, which was pretty cool. I dabbled with The Sims, mainly to see how they'd put it together. It works, but personally I wouldn't have tried doing something like that now because I don't think the technology is really up to it. I'm also hooked on Starcraft multiplayer. I wouldn't bother with it single player, but it's one of the best multiplayer games ever.

"I listen to just about any sort of music, from drum and bass through to Bach and Mozart. If I'm trying to come up with game ideas, then it'll probably be classical – I'll tune in to Classic FM or something – and if I'm programming it's drum and bass.

"I love reading, in particular science fiction. I'm a massive Iain M Banks fan. Oddly, though, I didn't like The Player of Games; my favourite is Consider Phlebas. I also like Orson Scott Card's Ender series. I read a lot of history, too, about subjects like Alexander the Great, the Dark Ages – and I'm very interested in King Arthur.

"I get a lot of ideas from films, I recently saw The Fight Club and The Matrix – though The Matrix is a bit of a cliche now; I think every computer programmer cites it as their favourite film...

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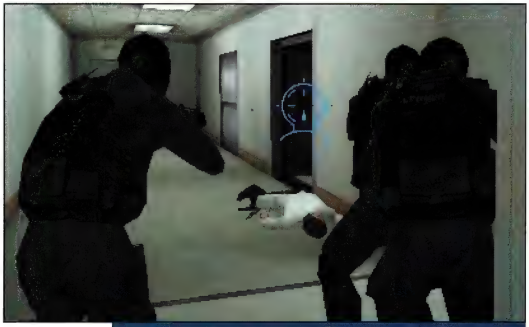
Officer down on Sunset Boulevard

Sergeant Ryan *provides some pointers on how to capture perps in the seedy streets of LA*

Sierra Studio's SWAT3 (reviewed in PC Strategy Games last month) brings new levels of realism and authenticity to the squad-based first person shooter. This is quite an achievement in a genre which prides itself on faithful recreation, and counts among its number such august titles as Hidden & Dangerous and the Rainbow Six series.

In fact, as we said in our review, in terms of realism, SWAT 3 is to Rogue Spear as Rogue Spear is to Quake. Swat 3 is not so much a game as a simulation, and the developers actually sat down with real SWAT team members and used their experience to create a hyper-realistic product.



Above: When moving down corridors, always keep your attention focused on open doors. Threats can emerge from them without warning

GOING IT ALONE

As such, it demands a coherent, well planned, well executed approach, despite the fact that, unlike other games in the genre, it does not present itself as a strategic challenge. It doesn't utilise a pre-mission strategic planning phase like Rainbow Six, or allow you to access an in-game strategic level map as Hidden & Dangerous does. While SWAT 3 provides a comprehensive pre-mission briefing, once you enter the given arena of operations you are effectively on your own.

Consequently, it represents an extremely tough tactical-level challenge which requires flexibility, fast reactions and, above all, a clarity of thought on your part. Before you embark on your career as a SWAT element leader, you'll need to choose your squad. As an element leader you will be placed in command of a team of eight assaulters, four of whom (making up an element) will accompany you on any given mission.

The composition of your squad exerts a huge effect over the progress of your career, and if you don't choose well here you will have stacked the deck against yourself before you've fired a single shot in anger. Essentially, what you're looking for in an element member, particularly if you're new to the game, is an experienced old salt. Experience is invaluable and no amount of aggression, weapons proficiency, or youthful enthusiasm can compare to years of hard won experience on the mean streets of LA. The experienced officer is more likely to respond intelligently and promptly to your orders and commands. He is less likely to lose his head in a tight situation and, perhaps most important of all, when he shoots, he generally shoots to kill. These attributes are all extremely desirable in a prospective member of your element and, when push comes to shove, make the 'years in SWAT' statistic the final arbiter of your decision-making process.

Once you've chosen your squad, you're ready to get down and dirty with the perps, crims, perverts and weirdos who call LA their home. Now, obviously, even by the whacked-out standards of LA, the little UN shindig which you've got to police and secure is going to have them crawling out of the woodwork in even larger numbers than usual. Your unit is going to face threats ranging from relatively innocuous 'lone gunmen' scenarios right up to fully armed,

highly ideologically motivated paramilitary terrorist units running riot in government buildings. In order to deal effectively with these threats you're going to need to ensure that you're completely au fait with the arsenal of weapons and equipment at your disposal.

SWAT3 allows you to kit out your squad with two distinct types of equipment. On the one hand, you've got the standard issue weaponry, which will generally constitute a primary weapon and a backup. You'll also need to consider the type of ammunition utilised. On the other hand, you've got an array of tactical equipment which can prove invaluable in facilitating the achievement of your mission goals.

Above: The Ventura Hotel in downtown LA, the scene of one of the more difficult 'protection' missions you'll face

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

SWAT3 does not provide the sort of exhaustive weapons inventory that you'll encounter in other examples of the genre. Weapons in the SWAT environment are purely functional tools of the trade. So it's not the size of your weapon which counts, but rather how you choose to use it.

There are three primary weapons to choose from. The Heckler & Koch MP5 (also available in a silenced variant) will require no introduction to most – it's the anti-terrorist standard and is used by practically every special forces unit in the western world. The SWAT variant has a nifty little torch on top to illuminate all those little nooks and crannies which will provide you with innumerable tension-laden moments as you progress through the game.

If the truth be told, there's nothing in the SWAT 3 bag of tricks which this little baby can't handle. Make it the default weapon of choice and you won't be disappointed. However, you may be insecure, unsure of your prowess as a lean mean crime-fighting machine. You may require something a little larger, a little more virile if you will, to bolster your self-image. Should this be the case you need look no further than the M4AI carbine which, with its lightweight and larger calibre provides a nice halfway house between a submachine gun and a fully-fledged assault rifle. Suits you, sir.

Quote

To deal with all threats you must be au fait with the arsenal of weapons at your disposal

Etiquette

The third position, in the primary weapon triumvirate, is occupied by the shotgun. The shotgun is, of course, a fine offensive weapon in its own right, but in the world of the SWAT team it has another extremely important function. It's used (in conjunction with specialist ammunition, of which more later) to 'breach' doors. This eliminates the need to fiddle with lock picks and provides an excellent shock tactic, capable of catching even the most hardened criminal off guard. It does, however, despite its initial shock value, tend to announce your presence to all and sundry in a rather spectacular fashion.

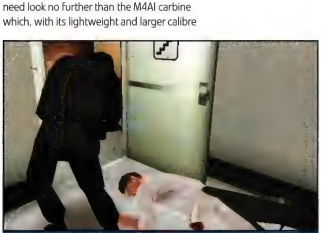
Also you should be aware that, if your adversaries are sporting this season's hot terrorist item, body armour, spraying them with lead pellets isn't going to have the desired effect.

Even with this qualification you should ensure that at least one member of your team is equipped with a shotgun. Their general utility value outweighs their lack of punch in some situations. Your secondary weapon is the venerable Springfield Armory 1911 A1.45 calibre pistol.

Ammunition, and more importantly your choice of it, plays a part in SWAT3. As you are technically part of a civil police force, you're not necessarily supposed to cavort about annihilating everyone who doesn't subscribe to your particular world view. As such you've got access to what is euphemistically known as 'less lethal' or non-lethal ammunition (yeah, right, two words – plastic bullet).

The secondary round for the M4A1 carbine is the Atlantis Arms Punch, a cartridge which contains an acrylic bag, loaded with lead shot. When fired, the bag, which looks something like a Brillo pad, is intended to disable the target without inflicting serious or fatal injuries. If you find yourself involved in one of those 'bring 'em back alive' type scenarios, it's best to ensure you pack some of these.

The shotgun has the standard buckshot round and as a secondary load the, wait for it, 12 gauge frangible breaching load. Now I'm reliably informed that 'frangible' simply means easily destructible. This round is fired at a door lock, shattering it and allowing quick entry. It can also be used to disable, rather than kill, a target. Conventional ammunition comes in two forms; Jacket Hollow Point (JHP) and Full Metal Jacket (FMJ). JHP is designed to expand on impact and is very effective against soft skinned targets. It can also cut down on the possibility of collateral damage because it's less likely to pass through walls and ▸▸



Above: Negotiating stairwells is perilous for the unwary

strike, oh say, a hostage hiding in a cupboard. Therefore it should be your default ammunition. FMJ emphasises penetrative power above all else and as a result is very effective in dealing with suspects wearing body armour. Be careful though because just like the Duracell bunny, this stuff tends to go on and on and...well, you get the picture.

BORN AGAIN HARD

You've also got a bewildering array of miscellaneous gear which will accompany you on each mission. Flashbangs and CS gas canisters are very useful room clearing and suspect suppression devices. Each squad member will carry a selection of these little wonders into each mission. Flashbangs are an absolute essential and their capacity to temporarily blind and otherwise discomfit your enemies will save you an awful lot of heartache.

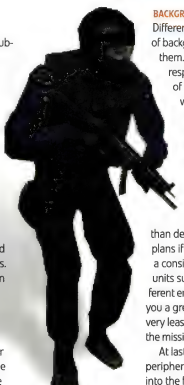
CS gas canisters will allow you to bring even the most recalcitrant offenders under your control. While he stands there coughing his lungs up, you can simply dash in and subdue him with the minimum of fuss. But perhaps the most useful device in your armoury is the Opti-Wand, which is essentially a mirror on a stick (remember that bit in Saving Private Ryan where Hanks sticks a mirror onto the top of his bayonet with some bubblegum to scope out the German machine gun nest? The Opti-Wand is essentially an evolution of that, which allows you or a squad member to peer into a room without actually sticking your neck out.) Ignore this little marvel at your peril.

Naturally, you've got your lock picking device and your handcuffs, essential for subduing and evacuating hostages and suspects alike (not to mention engaging in a little bit of after mission action, with some of the legions of panting SWAT groupies who follow your every move). We've also got Lightsticks, which are basically plastic tubes, filled with fluorescent material. They can be used to light up darkened areas, but more importantly they can be employed as a marker system indicating that a particular room or area has been cleared.

Right, so you've chosen your squad and made all the necessary outfitting decisions. Your men are 'salty' and you're 'born again hard', to use the lingo of the profession. Therefore you are now ready to steam in and sort out the seething criminal morass that is LA, right? Wrong. Leap in now, and your life expectancy will be roughly similar to that of a young subaltern on the Somme five minutes before he's due to kick off the 'big push' armed only with a swagger stick and a whistle.

Above: No time to congratulate yourself. Just keep your eyes on the prize and move on to the next objective

SWAT3 demands that you take very careful stock of each missions pre-assault briefing. Here you'll find a veritable mine of information, presented in various formats. You'll get an event description, crime information, the reports of the officers first on the scene, witness reports, suspect descriptions and so on.

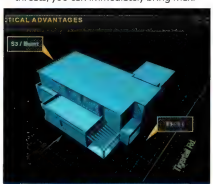


BACKGROUND INTEL

Different scenarios will have different levels of background information attached to them. Obviously, if you need to deploy in response to an emergency the amount of information available to your squad will be sketchy at best, but, there's a real avalanche of intel to be sifted through in some scenarios. It pays to examine this closely. At the very least, ensure that you're familiar with the mission objectives, so that you don't blithely execute the hostages you're supposed to be rescuing from a fate worse than death. Also take a good look at floor plans if they're available, as this can confer a considerable edge and enhance your units survivability. There may also be different entry points available which can give you a greater chance of success, or at the very least facilitate an alternate approach to the mission.

At last it's time to dispense with all these peripheral niceties and lead your squad into the fray. The key concept to bear in mind when manoeuvring your squad around the various levels is control. You need to take control of your environment, while maintaining control of your squad. Your element will be divided into two teams, red and blue respectively. How you choose to deploy them is up to you.

In the early missions it's probably best to adopt a piggyback strategy, i.e. deploying one squad to pick a lock and open a door while the other adopts a covering position. In this way, should you encounter any threats, you can immediately bring maximum, and hopefully overwhelming, force to bear.



Above: Don't forget to scope out all entry points at the 'Intel' phase

Inevitably, it will become necessary to split your squad to deal with some of the more complex scenarios. Make sure that you keep tabs on the activity of the detached squad by using the helmet cam. This indispensable little device will allow you to monitor their progress and hopefully allow you to respond relatively quickly to any sticky situations they may encounter. Becoming comfortable with the use of the helmet cam is an absolutely essential component of success-

fully commanding your element. As a general rule of thumb, it's best not to allow your individual squads to become too strung out. It's also imperative that you maintain an accurate mental picture of the detached squad's location relative to yours. Don't allow them to get too far ahead or it won't be long before they run into a situation they can't handle without your guiding hand.

In terms of overall tactical approach, there are two general stances that you can adopt: a stealthy 'steady as she goes' approach, or you can opt to 'go dynamic'. Going dynamic ensures that your squad will move as quickly and aggressively as possible through the level in question, dealing with threats in a 'no compromise' manner.

The stealth mode is probably the best way to start each level. If the going gets too tough, or if you feel a more robust approach is merited, you can always make the change mid-level. It is the case, however, that some levels do benefit from being grabbed by the scruff of the neck and shaken quite vigorously from the outset.

Should your squad members come under fire at any stage, they will automatically go into dynamic mode and take steps to deal with the threat.

FIRE AND MANOEUVRE

When moving through a level, take note of your surroundings and learn to use them to your advantage. Identify and utilise features which can provide cover, such as crates, furniture, shadowed areas etc. Also try to identify areas which may harbour suspects or indeed hostages, always bearing in mind that it's quite possible to come across both evil doers and their victims skulking in closets, wardrobes etc.

General tips for movement all centre on a fundamental SWAT maxim: minimise your vulnerability and exposure while ensuring that you maximise your own vision and perception.

When moving up a stairwell, ascend on the outside; when moving down use the inside. When scoping out and clearing rooms learn to use the 'Slice the Pie' manoeuvre. This move improves your view of a room while minimising your actual exposure to danger. Position yourself behind the corner wall and move at an oblique angle to the room about to be entered. It sounds complex, but actually you probably do it instinctively already, particularly if you're already familiar with the likes of Rogue Spear and Hidden & Dangerous.

Room clearance is an art form in itself and there are a number of possibilities. You can simply command a team to enter and search, but this is a high risk approach, and only to be utilised when stealth is a paramount concern. It's far better to prep the room with either a flashbang or a healthy dose of CS gas. There's nothing more depressing than sending a squad headlong into a room, only to see them slump to the ground, having succumbed to a cunningly positioned enemy. At the very least, ensure that you utilise the services of the Opti-Wand before committing a team. It's a simple two second operation which will save you a lot of time and, ultimately, frustration.

MEAN AND LEAN

When moving down hallways, always seek to prioritise 'open' areas or rooms. Adversaries can emerge from these without warning and you'll need to get the drop on them, sharpish.

When dealing with blind corners it's essential that you use the 'lean' command to take a quick peek. A momentary glimpse can be enough to ascertain whether an area is hot or not. Blind corners are also a favourite ambush location for your more devious opponents.

One of the major advances in the SWAT3 game engine is the compliance option. It's now possible to interact with your prey, albeit on a fairly limited level, by commanding them to submit to your tender mercies. Naturally, some of your quarry are far too hardcore to be cowed by anything as simple as a 'come out with your hands up' command, but you will be surprised at how often the use of this simple tactic will yield positive results.

If you can resolve a stand off peacefully without recourse to violence, do so, as it will enhance your overall performance rating and also more favourably dispose your squad members towards you. The last thing you want to acquire in SWAT3 is a reputation as a gung-ho loose cannon type.

These then, are just a few of the basic skills you'll need to master if you're to prosper in the white-hot crucible of SWAT operations. Perhaps the must difficult and desirable skill to acquire will be that of learning to leave the grunt work to your squad members. You will experience an insatiable desire to leap in yourself, lone-wolf style, and stalk through each level dealing death. Resist this urge! Your place is very firmly in the rear echelons, co-ordinating and commanding. Very soon you'll be taking as much pleasure from a well choreographed 'breach, bang and clear manoeuvre' as from a cleanly taken headshot. Honest! PCSG

Above: It's peaceful from the outside, but go in unprepared and you'll suffer

Multi-Player Update

SWAT3 – we played it, we loved it, we played it some more. There was, however, a rather large fly in the otherwise excellent SWAT unguent. There was no multi-player. Rainbow Six had it, Hidden and Dangerous had it, indeed, it was almost unthinkable that a squad-based tactical shooter could be released without it. Nevertheless, SWAT3 made its debut sporting only (a rather fetching) single player campaign.

Sierra Studios promised a multi-player upgrade and, thankfully, it looks like they're going to deliver. The upgrade is slated for an August release. It'll have full LAN support (for up to nine players) and allow you to battle online over WON.net. There'll be three different game types; co-operative, death match (in death match you'll lead your team against opposing squads) or competitive. You'll be able to play as a terrorist or SWAT officer and have access to over a dozen new weapons and associated sighting systems. There'll be a skin creator and, perhaps most intriguingly, a comprehensive level editor. SWAT3: Battle Plan, an official expansion pack, is also in the pipeline. It's expected to hit the street sometime over the summer. It'll incorporate full multi-play support from the outset, and you'll be able to battle it out with other teams using either live ammunition or even, wait for it, paintballs. There'll be loads of new weapons and all will be fully customisable right down to the length of the stock, ammo type chosen and preferred sighting system. There'll be six new single player levels and a complete level building utility. We'll also be given a skin editor which will allow for complete customisation. It appears that life on the streets of LA is about to become that little bit tougher.

The X-Com Collection

PCSG's very own expert on the paranormal and alien activity, ***Damon Wilson****, provides some in-depth advice on how to repel those pesky UFOs*

Some games are out of date before they hit the shelves, while others are as ageless as Count Dracula. In 1994, Microprose published a game with the unpromising title UFO: Enemy Unknown – and the company is still squeezing money out of that title six years later. That original game has never been out of the shops, either in the UK or in the US, where it was renamed UFO: Alien Defence.

UFO puts the player in charge of a secret global military force called X-Com (and later games in the series used the X-Com name) charged with defending the Earth against monsters from outer space.

Strange glowing objects have been seen in the skies, cattle have been found mutilated and people are being abducted - and they aren't coming back. You build bases, shoot down UFOs and send in the troops to capture alien technology and specimens from the wreckage. As your scientists analyse these artefacts, evidence of a horrifying alien plot begins to emerge...

Essentially, it's the old 1970s Gerry Anderson TV series UFO with a hefty dash of X-Files darkness thrown in and, in my humble opinion, is the best PC strategy game ever published.

If you missed UFO (and its three fine sequels) you now have a chance to buy all four in the new Microprose X-Com Collection pack for a mere twenty quid. Free advertising aside, you will be surprised how complex and demanding even the first X-Com game can be. Early mistakes can be very hard to rectify and the aliens will take full advantage of any blunder you make.

This is mainly a squad-level fighting game, but building a good support infrastructure is the key to surviving the first wave of the alien invasion. So, allow an old alien scalp-hunter to offer a few pointers. After that, you're on your own...

First of all, don't be tempted to skip UFO: Enemy Unknown to try the later (more graphically advanced) games. Not only is there a general, overall plot running through all four games that would be spoiled by playing out of sequence, but UFO is also an excellent trainer for the more difficult sequels.

On starting, you need to immediately get your house in order. Set your main base in Europe, the USA or in China near to Japan. This will guarantee lots of money from the

chosen area for at least the first few game months.

Go to the base screen and add a new living quarters area, a large radar dish, an alien containment cell, missile defences and a second storage bay. Later, when your money builds up a bit, you should aim to build two or three more living quarters, a third storage bay, and secondary research, engineering and missile defence units at this base.

Of course, there are other facilities you will need to add later, but telling you about them will spoil some surprises.

INVEST IN FIREPOWER:

Your engineers are not going to be able to do anything just yet, but tell all your scientists to work on the Laser project then, when it's complete, the Laser Pistol project. From now on, whenever they are not building something needed by your troops, tell your engineers to make stacks of laser pistols (remember, these contracts can always be halted if rush jobs come up). Laser pistols are quick to make and, when flogged, bring in the greatest net profit. Early in the game (and later, when alien infiltrated governments start to withdraw their financial support) regular laser pistol sales can be lifesavers. Buy more engineers as soon as seems viable to speed up the build times.

Next you need to retool your interceptors. Sell the useless cannons and their ammo and, as soon as possible, replace the stingray missile launchers for Avalanche missiles. Until you research alien-based interceptor weapons, Avalanche missiles will do a fairly good job on all but the biggest UFOs.

Finally, review your foot soldiers. Check their stats and sack any who have an Accuracy skill below 55, regardless of their other abilities. Next, sift-out any who have Bravery scores of 10 or 20 as these will panic at the drop of a hat. Later, when you've built-up a good roster, any troopers with Bravery of 30 should be put on garrison duties at secondary bases.

Lastly, remember to note the survivors' Strength scores; any with less than 25 should be loaded lightly until they build-up some muscles.

This process will probably have left you with only two or three soldiers. Order four or six more and repeat the above sifting process until (by the end of the second game month at the latest) you have 12 to 16 decent grunts on staff. Remember that clicking on their names on the soldier screen allows you to edit their monikers: I find nicknaming them helps ease of recognition in battle situations.

On your first visit to the procurement screen, buy as many scientists as remaining money and/or living space allows and, on their arrival, add them to whatever project you've got running. Your final aim will be to

1: Crashed alien spaceship on a farm
2: Same farm, X-Com forces closing in
3: Inside a big mother ship
4 and 5: Aliens terrorising a city, while you try to stop them

have 100 scientists at your main base, split between two research projects at a time. Deciding what to research – and when – is a lot of the game's fun, so I won't spoil it. Nevertheless, at the start, aim to get your hard-pressed soldiers the following basic technologies: medikits, laser rifles (via the Laser and Laser Pistol projects) and personal armour (from capturing at least the wreck of an alien craft, which makes the Alien Alloys project available). This will give them a fighting chance for survival for at least the next three or four game months.

Don't think about building another base until you have a spare couple of million in the bank. This may sound like a lot, but if you flog everything that becomes obsolete as well as a selection of alien artefacts, you could be in this happy position before the end of the first game month.

As to disposing of alien artefacts: sell all alien corpses bar one (and sell that when it's been autopsied). Do the same with UFO parts. Later in the game, when you need a few UFO Power Sources and Navigation units, you can make or capture new ones.

Sell alien guns, but keep half-a-dozen for your troopers' use after you've researched them. You can sell most of the Alien Alloys you get, but always keep a hundred or so units handy for new building projects. And never sell Elerium-115 or the ammo for alien weapons (apart from, perhaps, the ammo for the weedy plasma pistols) – you can't make this stuff yourself and you will certainly need all you can capture from the aliens.

OK, you've got the cash for a second base, by hook and crook. Wherever you placed your first base (Europe, USA or China), put the second in one of the other two places and the third in the last one.

Quote

Good base design is vital, as later in the game the little grey swine will attack you at home... minimise exits leading from the hangars and lift shaft

They came from outer space...

Unidentified flying objects have been seen throughout history. In the classical age they were seen as portents sent by the gods. Medieval peasants thought they were the elves and goblins. During the late nineteenth century they were thought to be phantom airships. Now we suspect they are extraterrestrials, secret government fighter craft or common-or-garden, low-flying hubcaps.

Above: Arrest all the usual alien suspects

Your fourth and fifth bases should go in South America and Central Africa (in either order) and your sixth, seventh and eighth bases can go in Australia, India and the Antarctic (if you want to go that far).

Your first base is automatically going to be your main operations centre, because it houses your research and engineering people. All subsequent bases should be thought of as armed listening posts.

SOLID BASE

Good base design is vital, as later in the game the little grey swine will attack you at home. Because your base is underground, the aliens can only get in through the hangars and the lift shaft, so minimise exits leading to the rest of the base from these. Your main base is bound to be a sprawling mess, but since most of your troopers are likely to be here when the aliens attack that doesn't matter too much.Secondary bases, however, need to be built right: just two troopers can defend a properly laid out base.

Here is the winning defence formula. Place the lift shaft in the middle of the screen, three squares down. Place a hangar above it and a general store below it as soon as you can.

All subsequent installations should be built from the store and should only touch the hangar of lift diagonally (which does not allow access). The result will be that your troops can slaughter the alien interlopers as they attempt to enter by funnelling them through the storeroom.

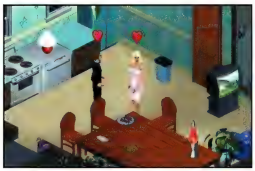
Secondary bases should be outfitted with large and small radar dishes, one or two missile defences, living quarters (for the garrison) and an interceptor for the hangar. This will protect the local area and keep neighbouring governments happy at minimum cost.

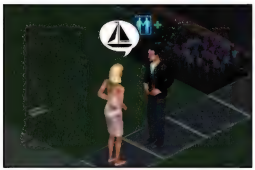
ALIEN INFILTRATION

Sticking generally to the above infrastructure plan should stop you going bust or being overrun in the first six months. Fighting the actual war – the main part of the game – is up to you, but I'll give you one tip (for which I'd have sold my soul back in 1994, when I first got hooked on this game): sooner or later the skies near one of your bases will fill with UFOs – two or three of the enormous battle cruisers, a couple of the large terror ships, maybe a medium sized supply ship and a diddy little scout. Ignore everything else and get that scout! It's an alien infiltration attack unit and it will conquer and claim any nation in lands in. Shoot it down or capture it on the ground before it can take-off again.

Good luck – and annihilate a Sectoid for me!

PCGL





Left top: Nice sims in love disgust the kids with public displays of affection
Left below: Sim Bluebeard gets the girls to move in – then walls them up

Sim love and death

Damon Wilson *provides some hints and tips on how to get your Sims falling in love and procreating: plus how to be a mass-murderer in one easy lesson*

So, you've bought Maxis' The Sims, you've set-up a household and customm-made the Sim inhabitants. You've found them the right appliances, wallpaper and leisure equipment for their meagre budget, forced them to get jobs and chat with the neighbours. Now you're wondering, "what's the point of Sim living?" Can you (and your Sims) bear to go on with the meaningless routine of Sim existence? In fact, you've got what Jean-Paul Sartre might have called Sim existential nausea...

SEARCH FOR MEANING

The answer is to find some Sim meaning and Sim purpose to life: specifically, achieve some of the few goals that this very freeform game allows you to chase. Firstly, you should earn your Sims some promotions so they can afford more material clutter. Clicking on the Career Track button will indicate what skills (cooking, mechanical, charisma, body, logic or creativity) your Sim will need to be eligible for the next promotion. Elevation is not, however, automatic. Your Sim will have to go into work in a state of peak psychological (Need scores) fitness for several days in a row to win the Sim boss' approval. Also, note that some careers, like Entertainment and Politics, demand a specific number of friends be earned before promotions can happen.

Well, that's the sensible stuff out of the way – on to the area that everyone's really most interested in: Sim nookie... Sorry, I mean Sim romance.

If you've been making your Sims interact socially with their more attractive neighbours, but have got nowhere, it is likely to be one of two problems – either mis-timed interactions, or the two Sims in question are incompatible character types. You can't do anything about the latter (apart from try and schmooze a different Sim) but bad timing is relatively easy to fix.

First press the Relationship button so you can monitor your Sim's precise feelings at all times. After Greeting an attractive stranger, talk to them three or four times in a row. This should get you to over +25 relationship points and will allow you to try something a bit more daring. Try a Joke or Entertain your partner, but don't try Compliments or Tickling until the score is over +35. At around +50, Friendship will bloom and Back Rubs, Dancing, Hugs, Cheering-Up and ('gasp') Flirting are worth a shot. At +70, love may flourish. You can now indulge in Kissing to your Sim's heart's content. If you want a Sim to get really serious with an NPC Sim, boost your Sim's Needs score as high as possible and treat the significant other to meals, presents, dancing, games and the like. Then get them kissing. As soon as you see a '+ +' symbol after a snog, make your Sim propose and Bingo! (I always cry at weddings.)

THE BIRDS AND THE BEES

Sim babies are made in much the same way, but the game will automatically ask if you want a little bundle of howling joy when you get a Sim couple to the right levels of kissing bliss.

On the other (sinister) hand, if all this sugary stuff bores you sick, then why not create a Sim Bluebeard? PCSG columnist Kristen Bowditch came up with a plot worthy of Hannibal Lecter...

Follow all the above tips to get an NPC to move-in with your Sim. Their money will come with them. Then edit away the doors while the newcomer is in the bathroom and let them starve to death. Result: lots of cash and no annoying, unnecessary Sims hanging about the place. Repeat as often as time and your stony heart allows... PCSG.

RPGs – innocent before

Damon Wilson *dons wig and funny clothes to attack Role Playing Games*

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury... It is a commonplace in the movie industry that scriptwriters hate actors. They sweat blood over a script, shepherd it through the insanely complex production maze only to see some monosyllabic clod get all the limelight, money and interviews; just as if it were the actors that were the creators of the matchless dialogue that they parrot on screen.

The same sort of relationship exists between PC Role playing games and strategy games.

Role playing games are the actors. They look good, draw the player in and make you feel as if you were part of the game world – but it's all just an illusion. The automatic suspension of disbelief that playing an RPG demands makes you feel that you are engaged in a complex and well-written game world.

Nameless One: "That spectre I was talking to, the woman."
Morte: "You were rattling your bone-box with some woman? Where? Morte looks around, excited. "What did she look like?"
Nameless One: "She was right on top of the bier. Didn't you see her?"
Morte: "Uh... no, you just kind of drifted out for a bit there, got stood there, statue-like. I was a little worried you'd gone addled on me again."

Above: Fine RPG? Yes. Strategy? Hardly.

SHALLOW AND TAME

The fact is, members of the jury, that RPGs can at best be called atmospheric; they are anything but deep. Any apparent depth of strategic gameplay is down largely to the player's imagination fleshing out an otherwise intellectually undemanding pastime.

To illustrate: the management aspect of RPGs is simplistic to the point of idiocy. The player gets to decide which members of the party stands where in the line-up and who carries what magic weapons. It's more like organising a school outing than a wild adventure. True strategy games, on the other hand, put diverse game management aspects into the players' hands. Complex military formations for hundreds of individual troops (as in Theocracy and Sid Meier's Gettysburg!), base/town defensive design (Earth 2150 and Battlezone II) and organisation of trade routes (Star Trek: Birth of the Federation and Age of Empires II) are just some obvious examples.

What can even a well-designed RPG (like Planescape Torment) offer in these areas? Troop formations – barbarians in the front row to hit monsters hand-to-hand, Elves with bows in the middle and wizards standing at the back to mumble spells? Playground games of Bulldog have more subtlety.

Defensive building strategy? Deciding on a safe place to camp and rest-up after a hard day's beast-bashing in the local dungeon is all that RPG's ever offer.

Trade? Going to a mysterious shop that buys and sells all kinds of adventuring gear and nothing else – despite the fact that your party seems to be the only such group in the local area. Talk about aiming at a specialised market...

Remove these 'strategy elements' (if they can truly be called that) and all that is left of the average PC Role Playing Game are the pre-set, multiple-choice conversations, the time-eating exploration and the often illogical puzzle solving.

I put it to you that PC role-playing games are nothing more than point-and-click adventures with delusions of grandeur.

While solid, honest strategy games are out there stretching our organisational abilities, our tactical savvy and our ability to beat human players in multiplay, RPGs are seeking to steal unearned strategic laurels with a wishy-wash mix of semi-tactical gameplay and nice graphics.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: I urge you to choose content over hollow show and reject role playing games from the pure intellectual heights of PC Strategy Games Magazine.

Thank you. The prosecution rests.

A history of Role Playing Games

It's more than 25 years since the publication of Dungeons & Dragons, the game credited with creating the Role Playing Game genre. Invented by a group of gamers led by Wisconsin plumber Gary Gygax, D&D opened up a whole new world – in fact, a limitless number of new worlds.

D&D took contemporary trends in wargaming (where gamers were concentrating on skirmishes rather than full scale battles) and added a healthy dose of amateur dramatics, Tolkien-esque fantasy storytelling and pop psychology. The result was a phenomenally successful game system that swiftly became hugely popular after Gygax and chums published them in 1974.

The single most important concept behind the success of D&D was the idea of character development. Players became incredibly attached to their characters, and there are many tales of gamers going into shock when their carefully nurtured Elven fighter mage (or whatever) went down beneath a tidal wave of trolls.

But D&D had certain inherent limitations, the most obvious of which was its lack of realism. Gamers complained, for example, that a blow which would kill a first level character would hardly even be noticed by a 10th level one annoyed many.

That, and the fact that the basic D&D system just didn't lend itself well to other milieu, led to an explosion

proven guilty?

***Barry Ryan** puts the case in favour*

The first thing that the more discerning reader will note in respect of the honourable Mr Wilson's shamefully ill-informed and woefully inadequate anti-RPG rant is that he has felt the need to adopt the persona of a member of the esteemed British legal profession to present his case.

Obviously, given the recent track record of that august institution, any credibility which he may have attempted to garner as a result of this rather weak subterfuge will be negated instantly. Now, with that little trompe l'oeil neatly disposed of, let's get to the matter at hand.

The great thing about a well-conceived and executed RPG is that it provides a multi-faceted gaming experience. It should combine tactical combat, a healthy strategic element and, of course, roleplaying.

The strategy should begin before your feet even touch the ground (in an adventuring sense, that is), in the form of the character generation elements. Now, for some reason there is a persistently recurring image of the role playing gamer opting for a halfling (i.e. Hobbit) thief because they identify on a deeply meaningful and personal level with Bilbo Baggins – short, stout, self-important and fond of real ale.

This is, of course, complete and utter nonsense. Like most other gamers, we role players like to maximise our chances of success in any given game, so we tend to choose characters which will facilitate this goal. If an Elven female mage with a penchant for necromancy will allow us to power-play our way through a game's many pitfalls, she's the one we'll go for. Then there's the party management, which is, of course, an incredibly demanding and difficult strategic – yes, strategic – skill. It's not just about deciding which formation best serves your purpose. You have to ensure that your characters are equipped with the best possible armour, weapons, potions and miscellaneous knick-knacks with which you must become familiar.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

You must be fully aware of the type of damage, say, a broadsword does to opponents of different sizes, how easy it is to use, and, perhaps most importantly, which creatures and enemies it is not effective against.

Now, if Rogue Spear demanded that we all became as familiar with the workings of the Heckler & Koch, frankly there would be a revolt. Unnecessary elaboration, they'd shout. It's a gun – you point it at a target and it shoots, they'd cry. That's all we need to know. But the RPG player needs to become effortlessly au fait with the most minute detail concerning a whole raft of weapons systems. You've got to adopt a flexible approach and be capable of constantly evolving your fundamental strategic approach.

I haven't even touched on the magic aspect of RPGs. You'll generally encounter at least two different major schools, priest and mage. Each of these are further subdivided, with the result that there is a multitude of spells to choose from, all performing different functions and effective in different situations. This is a vast amount of knowledge for the gamer to absorb and implement, and the correct use of magic, tailored to specific situations and adversaries, is one of the most fundamental strategies for success in any role playing game.

In the final analysis, RPGs provide as stiff a strategic challenge as any of your more 'hardcore' titles aimed at the dedicated strategy gamer. Indeed, the fact that so many strategy gamers also play RPGs seems to indicate that they derive a similar pleasure and satisfaction from the experience.

The defence rests. PCGS.

Below: Vampire: The Masquerade – the new breed?

of new RPGs and game publishers. One of the best known of these new publishers was Chaosium, which used in its original product, Runequest, a percentage based system which it later applied to a wide range of other subjects, including horror, with Call of Cthulhu. Runequest was later bought by Avalon Hill, which had (in one of those classic 'I turned down the Beatles' moments) rejected D&D when Gygax originally approached them.

While it never sold as well as D&D, Runequest was considered a far finer game by RPG cognoscenti, because of the elegance of the game system, the hugely detailed game world which Chaosium created and the 'realism' of the combat and magic systems.

Over the 25 years which have gone by since D&D burst on the scene, hundreds of RPGs have been published, covering a huge range of subjects – Warner Brothers-style cartoons, American High Schools, Hidden & Dangerous-esque commando operations, post-Apocalypse survivors, space opera, pirates, Samurai... You name it, there's probably an RPG on it.

And, of course, the RPG has been translated onto the PC screen, with mixed results (although DR D transferred rather well, both in the original PC versions done by SSI in the 1980s and more recently in the Black Isle Baldur's Gate series.

D&D was not just the first RPG, but also the most successful and the longest lasting. It has never been out of the shops, and later this year we will be treated to a third edition of the game and a number of D&D-related PC games.

For a 25 year old game, D&D's aging pretty well – rather better than many of the current crop of computer games are likely to over the next 25 years.

Martin Croft

Website Reviews

From freaks to fiction, here are a few of our favourite online offerings

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fortean times
the journal of strange phenomena

Fortean Times is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents.

It was founded in 1973 to continue the work of **Charles Fort**. Throughout his life, Fort was skeptical about scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data was ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away (which is quite different from explaining a thing).

Fort, born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshaled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in

Above: A quick browse reminds you what a weird world we inhabit

Right: Welcome to Sims-ville online. Get it while its still free

www.forteantimes.com

Weirdos and X-Files fans will love this site, but so will the level-headed out there – provided they have a healthy curiosity gland. The Fortean Times is the magazine of the Forteans, a movement composed of thousands of volunteers around the globe who continue the work of Charles Hoy Fort (1874-1932). Fort was a journalist who noticed how often odd events – like rains of fish, strange lights in the sky or sightings of sea monsters – were shelved and ignored by editors and scientists, not because they had disproved them, but because they refused to dignify such guff with their attention. Fort took the view that since a lot of these events hadn't actually been proved to be fake, somebody should catalogue them, just in case future (less conservative) investigators might find a reason to research them.

Fort spent the rest of his life hunting, recording and cataloguing reports of bizarre events. The Fortean movement does the same, combining the world media for everything from suppressed scientific research projects to yeti sightings. These the FT reports in an unbiased, agnostic fashion – in fact, their motto is: "As a Fortean, I have no opinion." Of course, the research opportunities on the net would have had Charles Fort weeping for joy. The FT's website is well set out, carries fascinating articles and the breaking weird news from around the world.

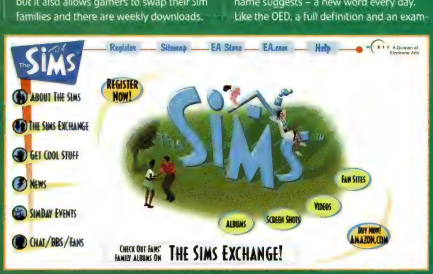
www.thesims.com

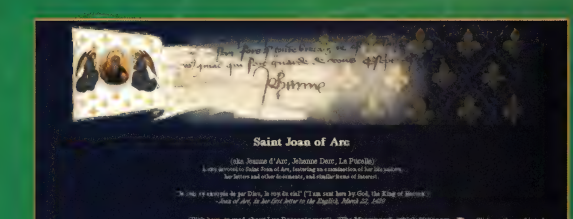
Even if you don't own the recently released Maxis game The Sims (PCSG issue 2: 9/10) and have no intention of ever buying it, have a quick look at this website. Maxis want The Sims to be more than a just a game – they seem intent on creating a genuine hobby. The site offers the usual chat forum, competitions and game news, but it also allows gamers to swap their Sim families and there are weekly downloads. These are either new Sim skins (this week, there were a pair of Viking bodies that looked rather S&M for such a family game) or new Sim household objects (a cuckoo clock and a hamster cage, for example). The site also carries skin and house designer programs to encourage players to create their own game modifications.

This last is what is so interesting about The Sims site. Many previous games have had web fan sites, but Maxis are encouraging Sims fans to get involved in the ongoing development of the game. If they come through with career and object design programs, the game will be fully manipulatable (I yearn to create a Sim Addams family). Such official, but free, sites must be encouraged, as it is rumoured that some of the bigshots in the industry plan to charge for such services in the future.

wordsmith.org/awad/index.html

There's very little harm in expanding the mind legally, and A.Word.A.Day enables those with a little web savvy to do that 365 days of the year. Part of the Wordsmith Organisation (which also provides several online dictionaries and an anagram creator), A.Word.A.Day is a mailing list that boasts over a quarter of a million subscribers in more than 180 countries around the world, who receive exactly what the name suggests – a new word every day. Like the OED, a full definition and an exam-




Saint Joan of Arc
(aka Jeanne d'Arc, Jehanne Dorc, La Pucelle)
Click here to read about Luc Besson's movie, "The Messenger", which strangely has nothing to do with Joan of Arc.
Please save your money for a different film.
Click on the graphic to hear "Veni Creator Spiritus", a hymn which was sung by the priests in Joan of Arc's army.

Above: A genuinely appealing 'fansite'

Right: This art and culture site is accessible and constantly evolving

ple of how it can be used accompany each word that is sent. Unlike the OED, however (which can now be found at www.oed.com), subscription does not cost £350 per year but is entirely free. The list provides a comprehensive definition and example of usage of many weird and wonderful English words to amuse, inform and expand vocabularies (today's word is 'ersatz'). Visually, the site is no great shakes, but this is hardly surprising given that it's dedicated to words rather than sounds or images. What's clear is that this is a labour of love – a great amount of effort has gone into finding and researching new, obscure and forgotten fragments of the English language. The site has just celebrated its sixth year of existence and has established a bulletin board for linguaphiles to exchange ideas.

http://www.maudslay.org

It's refreshing to learn that, alongside all the scams, spams and pornography, certain organisations are exploiting the Internet for somewhat more salubrious purposes. Although there are many good sites dedicated to art and culture on the net, one of the more promising homepages (it's new – and it's British, too) is the Maudslay Group. It's refreshingly unpretentious and broad in scope, offering fiction, poetry, music and articles (including an essay on computer gaming) from many different artists. As with the best sites, the medium is part of the message: much of the content of the site relates directly back to the technology used to create and disseminate it. There's plenty here to amuse and inform and, like many sites of this type, it's constantly changing: drop back in after a few weeks and you'll find a whole new set of things to see, hear and read. One of its most innovative and audacious initiatives is the creation of a number of virtual creatures, characters who will accompany users as they navigate the site, evolving as they do so and learning to write poetry according to what the visitors choose to teach them.

members.aol.com/hywwebsite/private/joanofarc.htm

It's rare to find a 'fansite' which is as literate and interesting as this one. Its creator, Allen Williamson, has brought together a whole range of material relating to Joan of Arc – or, as he says she should be more accurately called, Jehanne d'Arc. He includes images of actual documentation from her trial as well as surviving images of Joan and those involved with her, discussions of politics in early 15th Century France, a family tree in which he tries to trace her collateral descendants, a 'Joan of Arc Anti-Defamation League' debunking of the myths surrounding her life and death, and much more. The only real complaints about the site are the digitised versions of 'authentic' music from Joan's time (frankly, it sounds more like a mobile phone ringing) and those (blessedly few) moments where Mr Williamson gets carried away by those who sully his heroines memory (like Luc Besson). Those minor niggles aside, this site is a great place to learn more about Joan, and should particularly appeal to those who have been playing the French campaign in Age of Empires II.

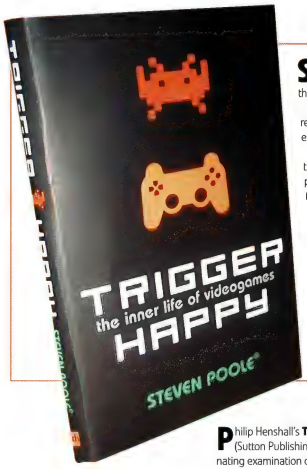
ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/TomMouat/Homepage.htm

This is Major Tom's home page – no, nothing to do with the David Bowie song, but rather a lot to do with military simulations. Major Tom Mouat MBE has served in the British army for 20 years, and for much of that time has been involved with designing combat simulations and military exercises. Major Tom is something of a font groupie, and tinkers about designing new ones for computers. While running training for ARRC (the army's rapid response force) in Germany, he came up with the idea for MapSymbs, a system which allows quick updating of computerised maps for those taking part in exercises. MapSymbs are standard NATO APP-6, and the new APP-6a, military map marking symbols contained as 'letters' inside a set of TrueType fonts, which you can install on your computer and use like any other font – except that when you type, NATO map symbols will appear.

poetry
essays
fiction
travel
music
visual
Fiction
Chronicles of the Imagination
The Dream Meme is an ongoing project which focusses on prose work and short stories purely inspired by dreams, with the emphasis on keeping the imagery as fresh and close to the original experience as possible. (Click to read) (Latest update: Jan 5th, 1999)
email:
New! Liz Welch, in these short stories, tells how the world is turned on its head for Tuibouldaks and Sin-Akku-Erib when they face up to the desires latent within them. Two new pieces from a poetic writer rich in language and imagination. (Click to read) (Dec 22nd, 1998)

Major Tom has also designed a series of fonts of modern planes, Soviet equipment, WW2 tanks and soldiers, and generic modern vehicles), WW2 German map symbols, symbols for drawing pictorial maps (trees houses, villages, castles, etc), a Science-Fiction personnel marking font for a game called Starship Marine (check out his links page), a map marking font for Napoleonic battles (infantry, cavalry, artillery and so on) and the ultimate in train-spotter fonts, MilTrain, consisting of pictures of parts of military trains. Many of these are downloadable for personal use for free, though if you want to use them for commercial purposes, you'll need to talk to Major

A finger on the videogaming trigger



Stephen Poole's **Trigger Happy** (4th Estate, pb, £12.00) provides a fascinating examination and exposition of the history, culture and development of 'videogaming' since its inception way back in the murky depths of the 1960s.

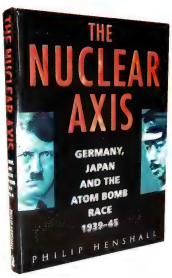
Poole approaches his subject with an academic rigour and respect which is as unusual as it is refreshing. He examines the rapid growth of electronic gaming, identifying it as one of the most interesting global phenomena of our times.

Poole also suggests that videogames might rightly be considered an art-form and so subject to the same process of exegesis as, say, an art critic would go through in examining a Renaissance painting. This achieves some startling results, particularly in the sections dealing with our perceptions of the virtual gaming world as presented to us by the games' creators.

There's also a remarkable analysis of the semiotics and iconography of videogames, and I would urge you to get your hands on this book, if only to read his breathtaking analysis of the significance of the signs, symbols and icons found in that venerable and much loved classic, PacMan.

There's hardly an area that Poole leaves untouched. He examines gender issues, the question of computer games and morality and international gaming trends, such as the Japanese preference for non-realistic anime-style protagonists.

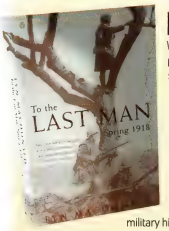
It's a bravura performance and is certainly a book which anyone with even a passing interest in the games world should acquire. If I have one criticism, it's that the book is perhaps a little too console-centric. I'd have liked to have seen an analysis of some PC specific issues and games. This is only a minor criticism though, and this book represents as fine an analysis of videogaming, its history and associated culture as you're likely to encounter.



Philip Henshall's **The Nuclear Axis** (Sutton Publishing, hb, £20.00) is a fascinating examination of a subject which seems to have been much neglected over the last 50 years – the question of just how close the Germans and the Japanese were to building an atomic bomb.

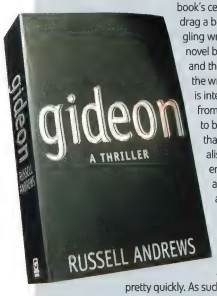
Conventional wisdom holds that the German team, headed by noted physicist Werner Heisenberg, had decided by around 1943 that there was no real possibility of producing an atomic bomb quickly enough to be of use to the hard-pressed Nazi war machine. There is also a secondary camp, which believes that Heisenberg and his team knew they could develop an A-Bomb, but that they refrained from doing so because they didn't want Hitler to have it. Finally, one of Germany's leading scientific journalists, Paul Rosbaud, was passing on top secret information to the Allies throughout the war, and told them that the German A-Bomb project was going nowhere.

But Henshall, who has spent a lifetime working in the nuclear industry, refuses to believe any of this. He argues that the Germans were actually very close indeed to developing a bomb, and that the Japanese were also in the race. Most people have no



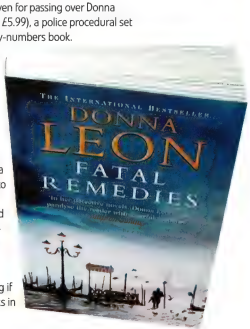
Lyn Macdonald is one of the foremost historians of World War I. Her approach combines the personal, the political and the strategic in one seamless and eminently readable package. She brings her subject vividly to life by basing her histories around the reminiscences and letters of the ordinary soldier who participated in the vast battles and campaigns. In many respects, Macdonald's work blurs the boundaries between social and military history, and there's no doubt that, as World War I fades from memory, her work will be regarded as an essential and invaluable resource. **To The Last Man:** Spring 1918 (Penguin, pb, £12.99) is a fascinating examination of the final days of the war. World War I is synonymous with the bloody battles that raged over the Battlefields of the Somme, Passchendaele and Ypres. These immediately conjure up images of wasteful, futile trench warfare – but we tend to forget that the final months of the war on the Western front were more reminiscent of World War II warfare. Also there is input from the ordinary German footsoldier, and a considerable amount of material related to the American 'Doughboys' or GIs who appeared towards the end. This is a brilliant work, which has the power to shock, terrify, sadden and anger in a way in which no conventional military history could.

The latest American airport novel to hit the UK bookshops is **Gideon** (Warner Books, pb, £5.99) by Russell Andrews. It's a very competent thriller, even if it does throw together the usual recipe for a book like this – deep-rooted conspiracy theories, a confused hero who doesn't know what he knows, a contract killer who is charming, articulate and ruthless, politics and big business. The book's central conceit, however, can drag a bit. The idea is that a struggling writer is hired to ghost write a novel based on some old diaries, and the tale of what happens to the writer and those around him is interspersed with extracts from the novel he is supposed to be writing. The reader knows that the idea is that by fictionalising the story, the truth will emerge – but while initially appealing, this book-within-a-book device quickly becomes clunky and gets in the way of the action. Significantly, Andrews himself recognises this and dumps the device pretty quickly. As such thrillers go, Gideon isn't bad and in some ways reads better than books by some of the greats of the airport novel industry, such as Grissom and Clancy. But you can't help thinking that a good editor would have cut it back by at least 20%. Books don't need to be sold by the pound...



idea that there ever was a Japanese A-Bomb project. The Nuclear Axis is brilliantly argued, and it seems impossible to fault the author's logic. It's a fascinating account of the German and Japanese 'secret war'. But, and it's a big but, it would have been even better if Henshall had tried to provide some conclusions. Why did those involved act in the way they did, and why have we been lied to for 50 years about just how close the Nazis and the Japanese were to the Bomb?

Detective novels set in foreign climes are becoming a dime a dozen, and you would be forgiven for passing over Donna Leon's **Fatal Remedies** (Arrow, pb, £5.99), a police procedural set in Venice, as simply another write-by-numbers book. Forgiven, but also sadly mistaken, for Leon's series of Venetian crime novels have been getting better with every one. This is the eighth, and begins with series hero Commissario Guido Brunetti called out to deal with a trivial act of vandalism. Usually, such a high-ranking policeman wouldn't deal with such a petty case, but the vandal happens to be Brunetti's own wife. Leon, who lives in Venice and loves it, warts and all, weaves a compelling tale of conspiracy and family honour with the day-to-day problems faced by the Italian police. Well worth reading, although it might be more rewarding if you pick up some of the earlier books in the series first.



Film monsters exhumed

Universal pictures has just reissued 10 classic black-and-white horror movies as the Universal Monster Collection, all priced at £9.99. Of course, this doesn't include the RKO-made King Kong, but all the other classic old monster movies are here.

The original **Frankenstein**, starring Boris Karloff as the monster, may have very little to do with the Mary Shelley novel, but it still reflects the common man's fear of scientists who play God. This movie is also notable for a fine histrionic performance by Colin Clive as Baron Frankenstein (this so impressed my Grandma she named my Dad after him). The **Bride of Frankenstein** is based on a couple of the later chapters of the Shelley novel, in which Frankenstein is blackmailed by the randy monster into building him a girlfriend. Not as good as the first movie. **Dracula**, with Bela Lugosi, is well worth £9.99 just for Bela's bizarre acting. The poor man didn't speak a word of English at the time of filming , and his creepy, alien intonation was largely due to the fact that he had no ideal what he was saying. **The Wolf Man** — with Lon Chaney Jnr as Fido — is not a great movie but may be worth a tenner just to see how 1940s Hollywood depicted rural Wales.

The Black Cat and **The Raven** are both very, very loose adaptations of Edgar Allen Poe stories, and **The Phantom of the Opera**, with Claude Rains as the loony, facially scarred organist, is worth the money if you find Victorian melodrama very funny. Rains also stars in **The Invisible Man**, and puts in an excellent performance as H.G.Wells' bandage-headed, see-through scientist. Unlike the Invisible Man, Boris Karloff as **The Mummy** does not sport bandages in this rather turgid horror movie. Finally, there is the **Creature from the Black Lagoon.** Scientists in early 1950's aqualungs hunt a prehistoric man-reptile in an Amazon lagoon. Here are beautiful underwater sequences, a surprisingly convincing rubber monster suit and possibly the first environmentally conscious horror movie script ever: this one is begging for a remake. Worth double the asking price.

None of the above are actually frightening, even by the most timorous standards, but most are very entertaining if you like a bit of over-the-top acting and melodrama. Also, being digital remastered, they are better quality than ones you could tape off the late-night telly.

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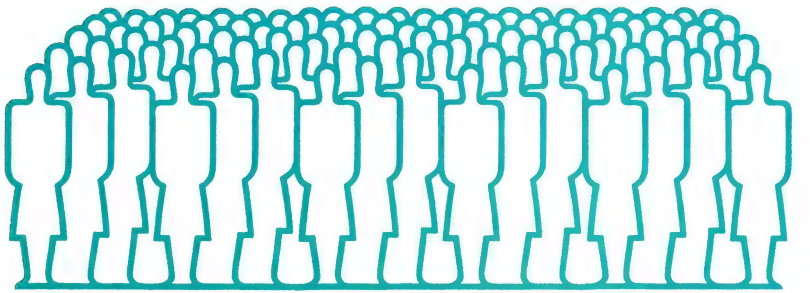


Game design – the final frontier?

*Our American cousin **Alan Emrich** takes a look at how the software industry has come full circle in the 30 years he's been involved*

Computer Strategy Games are big business these days. To a large extent, it has always been that way. In the old days (I've been on the business side of gaming since 1975, so that qualifies me as an 'old timer') every new PC game was a 'computer strategy game'. Think about it. As PCs started to appear in homes in the early 1980s, they didn't sport a lot of horsepower. Graphics and sound capabilities that rival television weren't science – they were science fiction. There were no vehicle simulators on PCs and no action sports games to speak of. Even the early role-playing games like Wizardry, and Might & Magic were more strategy than role-playing. (Hmm... that still hasn't changed.)

NO FRILLS

In those days, every game had to live or die by the quality of its design and by the depth of its strategy element. So much so that many PC games were computerized copies of boardgame staples like hex-based wargames and statistics-based sports games. There were no gee-whiz special effects and there was no marketing culture trying to dazzle people with these early titles. There were no online multi-player features that could cover up a weak AI and no movie sequences to link mediocre scenarios. Every game was meat-only, with no potatoes or dessert. There was nothing in a game back then that a bad design could hide behind but consumer ignorance.

The cycles have changed over the years. But now, I believe that although there are plenty of other things on a game's plate, people are a bit jaded with all these other tastes. Now every game has reasonably high graphics and sound quality. They all tend to sport multi-player play and feature some aspect of online support. Demos are available and printed reviews are numerous (and generally worth what you pay for them). What is coming back to center stage is the game itself and not its gee-whiz aspects. Just like yesteryear, the quality of the design and the depth of its strategy element are becoming paramount.

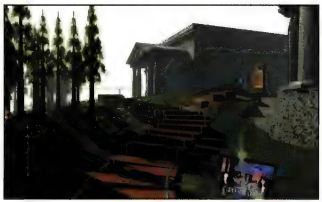
Unfortunately, the people who make decisions at the big computer game publishers are seldom their own market. These are not avid computer gamers and, if they are, few penetrate beyond the depths of Microsoft Solitaire or Myst to venture into deep strategy or role-playing games. Resource management is their job, not their hobby.

Consequently, to marketing types who can't see beyond cool explosions or licensing tie-ins, to sales types who are busy saying how their latest game is 'just like' the current hit out there, and to product developers who are convinced that they need to clone today's hits (like they'll still be fresh and state-of-the-art in two years when they're published) to ensure tomorrow's profits, this revelation is opaque. More and more, these PC game publishing decision-makers come from other industries and might as well be selling soap as computer games. They can't see beyond their own packaging to realize that the wheel is coming back around to the old standard: product quality. And for a game, particularly a strategy game, the heart of its quality is in its design.

FLAWED DESIGN

Granted, execution can help make and will certainly break a good design in these days of higher game support standards (graphics, sound, etc.). Consider Sierra's Outpost. This is the classic example of a great design betrayed by horrendous execution. But brilliant execution will not cover up a failed design. Look at Imperium Galactica from GT Interactive; great execution, flawed design. The list is legion.

Where publishers put their product emphasis can be seen in their product budgets. When they play 'Who Wants to Sell a Million Units?,' how do you think the publishers answer this question: where should we be spending most of our time and money on this new PC title? a) Marketing; b) Art ; c) Programming; or d) Design. If you guessed 'd' (was that your final answer?), go to the back of the class. You're clearly clueless. Keep reading this column and take careful notes. (The editor may quiz you on this next issue.)



Above: Many marketing executives' idea of a strategy game – Myst

THE FINAL FRONTIERS

So, for computer strategy game designs, the 'final frontiers' are also the first frontiers. Quality designs and good artificial intelligence are where this hobby genre started and where it is finally coming back to, now that the era of gee-whiz feature escalation is winding down.

With strategy games still dominating the PC game market (followed by role-playing and simulations), someone among the Big Publishers is going to figure out that glitz is nice, but not as necessary as design depth and good AI for determining a title's market penetration and longevity. Mine can't remain a lone voice crying out in the wilderness forever on the matter. At some point, your voices will join me and we, the customers, will be heard.

Coming up, what has become of those hard-core computer wargames? Are they doomed by the PCs success or will the Internet assure their future? PCSG.

*Alan Emrich **is the former Strategy Games Editor at Computer Gaming World magazine, has written several computer game strategy guides, and is currently a game designer at Quicksilver Software.***

Violence solves nothing

Computer games really aren't evil, says ***Kristen Bowditch***

Whilst pursuing my philosophy degree, I came across a number of great thinkers who believed in moral absolutes – right, wrong, good, evil. Morality, they argued, is inherent, stopping weak-willed humanity from doing the wrong thing.

Personally, I think this is bunk. What stops us doing the wrong thing is the fear of being caught. It is society that dictates morality – otherwise, how do you account for moral variables between different cultures?

ALL IN THE MIND

Okay, so this is beginning to sound like one of my final year theses: but there has been a lot of media interest recently in the issue of morality in computer games. In the press there have been a number of articles as knee jerk reactions to games such as Postal and Carmageddon, on the basis that they teaching kids the wrong set of values – that it is fun to kill, steal cars and run amuck with an AK47 with no consequences.

At the risk of sounding like a psychopath, of course it is. That's part of computer games' appeal – all that car jacking and zombie-killing goodness, with none of those law enforcement side effects. But it's a game, and as such it thrives upon providing us with experiences that we can't and wouldn't want to encounter for real. I may be wrong, but I don't think many people played Grand Theft Auto, thought "Joyriding – now there's a novel concept," and rushed out and stole a high-powered speedster.

As reasonable human beings, we know that our actions always have consequences. But the idea persists that somehow perfectly rational individuals watch a film or play a computer game and suddenly feel the need to gun down fellow snackers in McDonald's. I'm going out on a limb here, but there was probably a screw or two loose before they ordered fries to go. Computer games are popular with the young, while few adults understand the appeal. So when a young person does something dreadful, it is easy for adults to seize upon computer games – particularly violent ones – as the cause. But computer games are just this year's scapegoat, and join a long line of accused: video nasties, films, TV programmes, role playing games, comics...

In 1998, Michael Carneal opened fire on his classmates in West Paducah, Kentucky, killing three students and wounding five. After the event it came out that Michael was an avid computer player of Doom, Quake and Mortal Kombat. Last year, the families of the three murdered students filed a $130 million law suit against 25 defendants, including Nintendo, Sega and Sony Computer Entertainment.

"The suit accuses the companies' products of corrupting the minds of adolescents. The computer games trained Carneal to point and shoot a gun in a fashion making him an effective killer without teaching him any of the constraints or responsibilities needed to inhibit such a killing capacity," the suit claims.

But the body representing the US software industry, the Interactive Digital Software Association, has hit back. IDSA president Douglas Lowenstein said, during a keynote speech at the 1998 Electronic Entertainment Expo in Atlanta, that "video games are not the source of violence in our society. That's like blaming illiteracy on television."

He added: "It's time we look at availability of guns and dysfunctional families as the source of violence, not games."

If any charge can justifiably be levelled against computer games, it is that excessive playing can lead to self-isolation and a warped social outlook.

But in a recent article about his people simulation The Sims, creator Will Wright countered the accusation that excessive playing of computer games led to decreased social interaction.

If anything, he said, the Sims teaches you that all play and no work made for unhealthy and unbalanced Sims. Indeed, having played it extensively, I can now say that I fully realise the benefits of keeping my charges socially active, as the 30 unanswered messages from all my friends on my answering machine can testify. They'll be saying that computer games improve hand-eye co-ordination next...

The point is that games are games, and as such do not have a lot of basis in reality. Sometimes the twain meet; but let's be honest – who wants to spend hours playing a supermarket shopping sim, or Gran Turismo: The M25 circuit?

A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Sure, there have been games originally designed for fun which have been used as educational tools. Theme Hospital, for example, was at one time being played by NHS trustees so they could learn how to better manage funds.

But ultimately, games are pretty much like any other leisure activity – they're less mind altering than alcohol and more anti-social than monopoly. Certainly there is a moral responsibility for the games industry, and games, like films and CDs, are classified, in the UK at least. You are supposed to be 15 to buy Resident Evil and 18 to buy GTA, and if children under the age limit are playing these games, then surely it is the parents who are letting them do so who are to blame, not the software industry?

As for America, it's no good having a movement demanding an end to violence in computer games in a country where it's your 'constitutional right' to bear arms – even, it seems, if you're only six. PSR

Kristen Bowditch is a business journalist covering the pharmaceutical industry and is also a part time play-tester for computer games company Eidos.

Right: In SWAT 3, despite this pic, you spend much of the game trying not to kill people

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Strength Through Strategy

They're simply the best?

***Mike Siggins** reflects on his all-time favourite games, and marks out the ones that fall by the wayside*

I have the odd book dotted around the house. Well, almost 2,000 of them, in fact. The psychologists would have a field day I'm sure, but I keep them for reference and browsing, because I can return to the good ones, and for the aesthetics – as the old saying goes, books do furnish a room.

I also have a small shelf with PC game boxes and, broadly speaking, they survive on much the same criteria. But considering I have been playing them for nearly 10 years, their number is surprisingly low – around 30, and many of those slimmed down to just the media and manual.

Of course, in the same way that books age and fall apart, my treasured PC games become redundant. Hardware moves on, operating systems change, as do expectations. I loaded up another all-time favourite recently, SimCity 2000. Either my memory is rose-tinted, or there is some form of 'expectation creep' going on, because this is a game that looks very disappointing nowadays. I am sure there was more detail than that in the buildings, and that another level of zoom was possible.

Fond memories exaggerating reality, or just one's imagination filling in the gaps at the time?

Above: AoEII at 4 in the Siggins' Top Five – could move higher yet
Below: Tell Lara I loathe her...

As much as I was disappointed by Sim City 3000, it is still an upgrade and one that keeps one of my Top Three very much alive. Conversely, I doubt we will ever see upgrades of the sublime 1830, El Fish or Stats Soccer Replay, but if I ever become disgustingly rich I will be sure to commission them.

BETTER THAN ALL THE REST

Whatever, there are titles that will soon be discarded to make room for others: The entire Battleground series will be whittled away to leave just Waterloo representing a cherished era; Star Wars Supremacy will be binned, simply because however many times I load it, it still won't live up to my hopes; A-Train goes, because I never quite worked out how play it; Unnatural Selection – an almost there title, but no cigar; and Birthright which, despite the scope, fails on those appalling graphics.

They will be replaced be a steady stream of new games, perhaps ten a year, of which a couple might make the 'Worth Keeping' grade. Is that a tolerable ratio? Or am I just too fussy?

I also would argue that, considering the hit-to-miss ratio, PC games are expensive in absolute terms. A number of titles obviously do appeal, but I rarely pay full price, and never quite get round to ordering them by mail. For me, it's usually a wait of a couple of months for the price to drop in the shops, or longer, for the game to go budget. At a tenner, one can hardly go wrong; the reviews have been read, the demos played. As an example, I enjoyed Organic Art and Creatures for a few sessions, but wouldn't want to have paid £30 for them.

So it was a real pleasure to see the opinions of the PCSG staffers mainly affirming my favourite games last month. It was a relief that we were spared the endless fawning over Quake, Half Life and the lovely Lara we see elsewhere on the stationer's shelves.

I'll hold up my hands and say multiplayer Doom over a network was among my very best gaming experiences, but it isn't one I'll return to, or even discuss in the same sentence as Links, Western Front, Caesar III/Pharaoh, Blade Runner, Wizardry, Close Combat, Magic: The Gathering, Star Saga, Tetris, Grand Prix 2 or Dune. And none of these even make my Top Five (and no, I didn't leave out Civilization – never has there been a more overrated game).

So which games negotiate the vicious Siggins critical facilities and reach the hallowed Top Five? Easiest choice in the world, whereas I could never name my favourite books in a millennium of self-torture.

At number 5 is Elite. Sad to say the concept has never been brought up to date, though we live in hope. Number 4 is Age of Empires, which may yet move up a notch or two, as long as it doesn't get any more difficult. Number 3 is Sim City (in all its incarnations) which speaks for itself. Number 2 is Transport Tycoon because there has never been a better business game that is also immense fun. And the best of the best? Syndicate. Yes, it had some daft moments, and got a bit puzzley at times, but there is no better mix of action, tactics, strategy and sheer innovative brilliance.

Mike Siggins ***has been playing games for 25 years and writing about them for 15. He is a consultant in the fields of corporate treasury, motorsport and the Internet. He also heads Aethereal Design, currently developing several boardgame titles and a PC simulation for a major publisher.***

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Broken Sword 1,2
Caesar 1,2,3
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Dark Forces 1,2
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Heroes Quest
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Homeworld
Imperium Galactica
Incoming
Indiana Jones & the Fate of Atlantis
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Ivar
Jedi Knight
Jeff Gordon Extreme Racing
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Kingpin
Klingon Honor Guard
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Men in Black
Microsoft Flight Sim '98
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Nightmare Creatures
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Pandemonium 1,2
Pharoah
Pitfall
POD
Police Quest: Swat 2
Populous Series
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Q-U

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Railroad Tycoon 1,2
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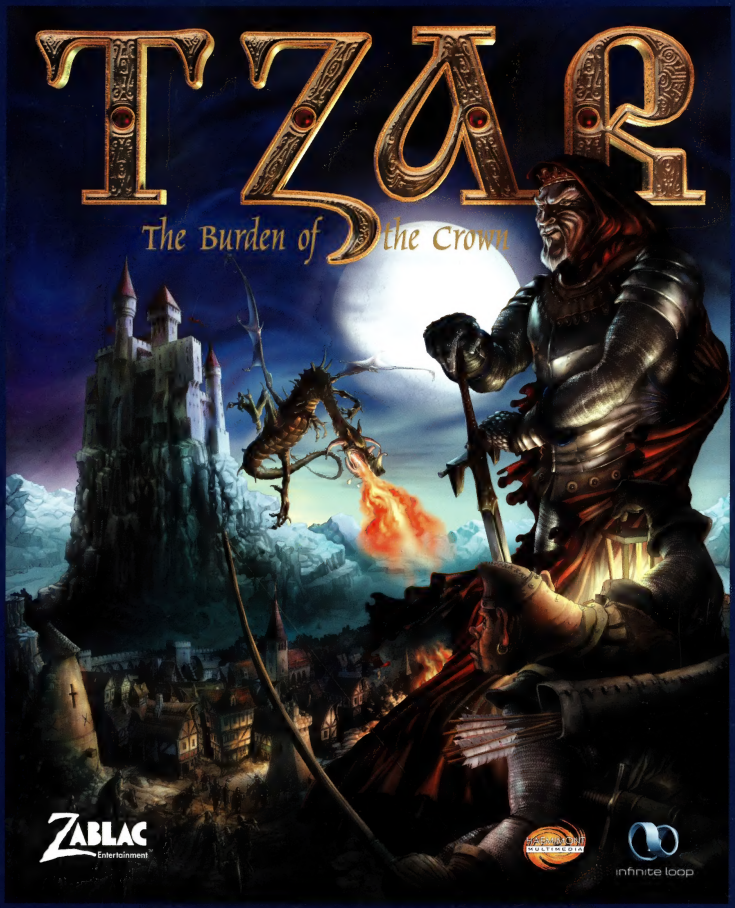

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